

Nation, Power and Dissidence
in Third Generation
Nigerian Poetry
in English

Sule E. Egya

**African
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*Nation, Power and
Dissidence in*
Third-Generation Nigerian Poetry

in English

Sule E. Egya



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Introduction

Poems are not mirrors and they are not lamps, they are social acts...

— Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts: the Historical Judgement of Literary Work*

[L]iterature involves our deepest responses to the facts of human existence and intervenes in those areas of experience where we assume consciousness of our situation with regard to others and to the world.

— Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*

More than a year into the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, not only in his capacity as a foremost African novelist, but also as a war minstrel of the embattled Biafra, was invited to give a talk at a political science seminar at Makerere University College, Kampala. The title of the talk mirrored his status as a minstrel: ‘The African Writer and the Biafran Cause’. It did more than that: the title, as the propagandistic body of the essay showed, was to direct the sympathies of writers and intellectuals towards a justification for Biafra. At the beginning of the talk, Achebe made a statement which some saw as vital, even if prescriptive: ‘It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames’ (78). This comment, made in 1968, under the influence of war, a year after the protean Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, had made such a demand in perhaps stronger terms, makes the invocation vivid for the purposes of this book. Soyinka in his 1967 essay, ‘The Writer in a Modern African State’, first delivered at the Swedish Institute, had made a sweeping attack on African writers that he considered fixated on ‘the fascination of the past’ (*Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, 19). These writers were, in his view, either self-compelled or compelled by cultural, political, and continental nationalism (negritude, pan-Africanism) of the time to romanticise the past of Africa. Soyinka declared: ‘When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognise that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon’ (*Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, 20).



The foregoing invocations are important to this work in two senses. Firstly, the Nigerian civil war, which influenced Achebe's stand, and to some extent Soyinka's, was the culmination of the social unrest, the political instability, the intense ethnic disaffection and mistrust, sparked off by the first military coup, and counter-coup, in Nigeria.¹ It will be seen later on that the second time such a condition would manifest itself in the Nigerian polity was in the aftermath of cancelling the 1993 general elections by the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. This is a phenomenon that inscribes itself as the core of the historicity of this book. Secondly, Achebe and Soyinka's standpoints (which are really prescriptions) on what the writer should concern him/herself with, that is, on the thematic exploration of the writer who sees him/herself as African, has had far-reaching consequences on Nigerian writing, including the poetry with which this book is concerned. This provides an ideological, cultural, even textual connection among what are seen as 'generations' of writers in Nigeria today.

The individual poets studied here find themselves implicated, by birth, by circumstances, by comradeship, and most importantly by personal will in a cultural struggle in the sense prescribed by their precursors (such as Achebe and Soyinka above). By becoming aware of their given social circumstance, mostly dictated by the socio-political and cultural goings-on in their society; by choosing to engage in the practice of manipulating what Stephen Greenblatt calls the 'general symbolic economy made up of the myriad signs that excite human desire, fear and aggression' ('Culture', 12) in their society, the poets have a sense of involvement that locates them in the wider sphere of what has come to be broadly regarded as social engagement in African literatures. In this sense, the poems studied here come together, or are perceived, as a discursive attempt, having a shared sense of poetics, a shared historicity, to generate a subversive regime that has the will or the tendency of becoming in its counter-hegemonic move, hegemonic. Hegemony is used here in the Gramscian sense.² The question of relevance – that an artist, a writer, must make herself relevant by concentrating on the most pressing socio-political issues – has long legitimised what are seen as important literary writings in Nigeria.³ It is in fact in the formation and entrenchment of the sub-tradition of Nigerian writing that emerged immediately after the war, with such powerful exponents as Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, and Femi Osofisan, that we feel the presence of a strong cultural hegemony in the field of literary production.

It is thus the main contention in this book that the poems critiqued here are produced by very conscious activists, radical poets who, in textualising the event of the repressive rule of the military regimes of the 1980s and the 1990s in Nigeria, have raised, through poems, a hegemonic discourse that installs itself as a political struggle towards unclenching the fists of what they consider viperous regimes on the land.⁴ For the purposes of considering these poets with regard to the cultural and socio-political formations in which they interact, this researcher would use



‘military era’ as a historical marker for these poems as well as for the poets.⁵ The engagement with the poems centres on reading them as a historically conditioned, culture-situated discourse category. The poems constitute an active production of language objectivised by power discourse, in which case the tropological strengths of the poems engender a discursive formation if, and only when, located within a specific historical era whose event they have textualised. History, as part of the entire cultural matrix, overwhelmingly asserts itself here. It is in this sense that the cultural materialist practice of reading a work of literature in the wider context of its articulation, its production, its interaction with other practices, and its political effect, becomes vital to this analytical exercise.

When the British Marxist theorist Raymond Williams got dissatisfied with orthodox Marxism, he formulated what he called cultural materialism. Driven by what he saw as ‘radical changes in the social relations of cultural process within British and other comparable societies’ (*Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 245), Williams jettisoned the ‘received formula of base and superstructure’ and recast important Marxist categories such as culture, language, materialism, mainly rejecting as simplistic and reductionist earlier conceptions of them. It is not in the scope of this book to offer an analysis of Williams’ work, since what is of interest to this research is the influence his work has had on the modern scholarship practices called cultural materialism and the new historicism. Evidently, the influence is mainly located in Williams’ assessment of culture. In his view, ‘meanings and values’ are produced by ‘specific social formations’ where language is central, where ‘complex interaction both of institutions and forms and of social relationships, formal conventions’ (*Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 243) take place. This he defines as ‘culturalism’. His argument is that cultural productions emerge out of a complex interaction of social forces. In this complex interaction, Williams refuses to privilege literature as a social practice or see other practices as being merely reflected by it. ‘[We] cannot’, Williams writes, ‘separate literature and art form from other kinds of social practice in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws. They may have quite specific features as practices, but they cannot be separated from the general social process’ (*Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 44). This informs cultural materialists’ and new historicists’ conviction that a work of art is one of the diverse practices in culture and history, and to understand it one has to situate it within a cultural and historical sphere to comprehend the complex interaction that begets it and in which it actively participates. Also of importance is Williams’ revaluation of language in a society; the idea of language as reflection of reality is, to him, inadequate. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams writes of language being ‘constitutively human’ (24), that is, ‘a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process’ (31). Writers, such as the poets studied in this book, regard language as in fact the most vital constitution of their artistic struggle. The poet’s

greatest strength is located in her power of articulation; in the capacity of her poetry to engender a powerful discourse as a contribution to ongoing cultural struggles. Williams' ideas, and the ideas of other cultural theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Antonio Gramsci, the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power influence the reading practices that in British scholarship is known as cultural materialism, and in American scholarship the new historicism.⁶

What is now taken as the manifesto, as it were, of cultural materialism is contained in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's introduction to their *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. They propose a practice of reading based on 'a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis' (vii). Their reason for this is expressed in these clear terms:

Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which most criticism has hitherto been conducted; textual analysis locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored. (vii)

This materialist reading, from the outset, proves itself to be eclectic, as its concept of 'theoretical method' embraces all theories. Coming as it did (along with the new historicism) against the institution of the Anglo-American New Criticism, this practice proclaims itself to be openly political. Cultural materialism 'does not pretend to political neutrality. It knows that no cultural practice is ever without political significance' (Dollimore & Sinfield, viii).

The major propositions of cultural materialism namely the privileging of contextuality, the constitutive position of a literary work in a cultural domain, its desire to subvert major voices of power in a literary text or in a culture and to draw attentions to marginalised voices, among others, are similar to those of new historicism. In his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt outlines a strategy for reading which, in a broad sense, has today become the practice of the new historicism. In his words, 'literature functions [...] in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behaviour is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes' (4). His interpretive practice embraces these three ways. He goes on to argue that any reading that limits itself to the behaviour of the author only turns out to be a biography of the author; any reading that only concentrates on literature as expression of 'social



rules and instructions' risks being reductionist in its sociological perspective; and any reading that conceives of literature as 'a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioural codes' would turn out to be an exercise in formalism in which literature is regarded as a closed system. A reading that collapses the three, as Greenblatt advocates, is based on what he calls 'a poetics of culture'. It is a cultural criticism that is 'conscious of its status as an interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture' (4). One vital attribute of this criticism is that it does not demarcate 'one type of discourse from another or [does not separate] works of art from the minds and lives of their creators and their audiences' (5). This is tantamount to cultural materialists' refusal, following Williams, to place literature above the entire cultural system in the scale of things. Greenblatt points out, 'if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of culture within which it was produced' ('Culture', 13).

Culture is perhaps the major operative term here. Both cultural materialism and new historicism think of culture as a broad domain for individual, social and institutional interactions – interactions that are, in the least, complex. Consequently, it cannot be a sphere of unity, as interests, dominant and non-dominant, clash. Dollimore, in expatiating a cultural materialist concept of culture, identifies three aspects of cultural process namely consolidation, subversion and containment. In his words, '[the] first refers, typically, to the ideological means whereby a dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself; the second to the subversion of that order, the third to the containment of ostensibly subversive pressures' (*Political Shakespeare*, 10). The emphasis is on culture as a sphere of struggle. The tussle is between the established institution, what is otherwise called power, and the marginalised institution. Similarly, Greenblatt conceives culture in terms of what he calls containment and mobility. 'The ensemble of beliefs and practices,' he writes, 'that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform' ('Culture', 11). There is therefore that desire by any given culture to control individuals, and this is what Greenblatt calls containment. But most individuals, if not all, do not want to be contained, to be policed, as it were, by a set of beliefs imposed on them by the dominant elements in the culture. Hence, the idea of mobility – that a culture also serves as 'the regulator and guarantor of movement' ('Culture', 14); this movement is possible through what he calls 'improvisation'. Here, according to Greenblatt, literature plays a vital part as it often becomes a medium for improvisation, which he defines as 'a set of patterns that have enough elasticity, enough scope for variation, to accommodate most of the participants in a given culture' ('Culture', 14). A work of literature such as a poem or a drama is not only capable of bringing to its readers' attention the set of

limits within which they live in a given culture, but also offers its readers a direction towards a reconstitution of cultural boundaries. That is to say, writers, by absorbing a given cultural context in their works, either reinforce or challenge social-cultural norms in the society; and, works of art can go beyond that as they can also reinforce or challenge literary boundaries. With this premise, the term ‘absorption’ cancels any dichotomy between text and context. To put it less crudely, context is not seen as a background to a text. Cultural contexts are not outside the text, the text absorbs them. Elsewhere, Tony Bennett proposes this kind of collapsing of text and context in what he calls ‘reading formation’. He writes, ‘[the] concept of reading formation [...] is an attempt to think of context as a set of discursive and inter-textual determinations, operating on material and institutional supports, which bear in upon a text not just externally, from the outside in, but internally, shaping it – in the historically concrete forms in which it is available as a text-to-be-read’ (‘Texts in History’, 72).

In this political, materialist reading, this research views the military era poetry in Nigeria studied here as absorbing the cultural contexts of Nigeria during its emergence. It is embedded in the historicity and culture that form the condition of possibility for its production. As an active part of the culture, the poetry comes through as a dissident discourse in an arena where the dominant elements were the military authorities and their collaborators, and non-dominant elements were the poets and those unprivileged masses whose voices were silenced by military despotism. This poetry finds itself side by side with other diverse cultural practices (media, music, painting, personal narratives) struggling to dislodge military oppression. The reading takes the view that the language used by these poets does not merely reflect events but absorbs and relativises events by way of ideological contestation. Therefore, a typical political poem from the military era in Nigeria is better viewed from a performative dimension whereby it is not only a site for ideological battle, but also itself an action of the struggle. In other words, it performs the struggle.

The notion of performativity – that a poem is an act in a society, performing a certain action – is central to this work. To read the new Nigerian poetry here as a mirror or medium of events that took place is to deny, in a simplistic way, the textual, discursive hegemony that emerged out of a complex interaction during the military era in Nigeria. Jerome McGann elaborately develops the concept of the poem as an act in his book *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgement of Literary Work*. Expounding his ideas from what he sees as ‘four influential modes of discourse’ namely historicism, formalism, deconstruction, and Marxism, McGann attempts to unveil the illocutionary force of a poem, most importantly its performative dynamism. ‘[Every] poem,’ McGann declares, ‘is an action, and the text is its residual form’ (55). This is most appropriately true of what, in Jeyifo’s words, is ‘the new poetic ‘revolution’ (‘Afterword’, 609) in Nigeria



since the civil war. This revolution, which in Jeyifo's view is largely in the aspect of 'poetic diction', is hinged on the view that poetry is a utilitarian art. Language, for these poets, goes beyond merely reflecting reality; it constitutes reality and, further, becomes a site for verbal action against oppressive regimes. Individual intention in the form of a socialist credo prefaces the poem; almost all the poets have prefaces to their collections that express the utility of poetry in time of peril.⁷ These expressed intentions are central to the view that poetry, for these poets, transcends the phenomenon of craft; it is active engagement; it is an instrumental discourse in an ideological struggle.

Further, the interpretive practice here places emphasis on the entire process of the production of this poetry. According to McGann, '[the] options that writers choose in the areas of initial production, as well as in printing, publishing, and distribution – the options that are open to them in these matters – locate what one might call the 'performative' aspect of the poetic: what poems are doing in saying what they say' (74–75). To study the Nigerian poetry of the military era without recourse to the entire range of choices that the new poets made in publishing their poetry is, in the view of this research, undermining a crucial component of their aesthetics of rage. For a poetry that emerged during the intensity of both military government censorship and self-censorship, its unabashed, provocative, confrontational, even militant, encounter with power is only fully mapped and critiqued with a consideration of the temperament of the publishing industry during its production. This is in fact a main factor in mapping this poetry as a distinct discourse category, as a distinct utterance of a generation, as this book does. The seminal, generation-making, anthology *Voices from the Fringe*, and all other anthologies that follow are mostly self-published. Self-publishing here extends to private publishing corporations that, in reality, may fund a publication but does not, or cannot, offer it all the perks that come with conventional publishing.⁸ Self-publishing, or private-publishing, at a time when conventional publishers such as Heinemann, Longman, and Macmillan implicitly declared Nigeria an intellectual graveyard, or at a time when the extreme militarisation of Nigeria led to intellectual apathy, goes beyond the mere play of ego.⁹ The poets of the military era did not go through the difficulty of funding their publications, as hard and harsh as life was then, only because they wanted to be recognised as the next heroines and heroes of Nigerian writing, but because they had been hurt into writing poetry, they felt compelled to circulate within the culture a poetic discourse that could realise their anxiety for a nation adrift, and their combative spirit against military oppression. Even before publishing individual volumes, there had been a fraternising spirit of poetry or writing clubs, of peer reviews, of chapbook publications, and of campus literary activities. Interestingly, these activities were carried out in some places, such as Lagos, Ibadan and Nsukka with a certain measure of anti-military activism.¹⁰ Newspapers became a viable medium for, especially, poetry that sought to speak to power (see Bodunde and

Osundare). Beyond ensuring that the Nigerian literary production did not altogether collapse into limbo, these poets, and writers, undoubtedly, had a conviction of their art as a potent machinery for checkmating what they saw as the strangulation of Nigeria and its people, by a cabal of military generals.¹¹ It is in this context that the idea of nation as a community, whether imagined or concrete, is central to this reading. For the poets concerned with here, the cleavages and contradictions in the nation-state offer a sociological platform to validate, through tropes, their extra-ethnic confidence in the existence of Nigeria as a nation-state. Their poetry, as would be demonstrated in the coming chapters, exemplifies Clara A.B. Joseph's view that 'the contradictions and differences that the nation attempts to remove are in fact constitutive of the concept of the nation. The nation is constituted by the very difference it seeks to overcome' (57). Fredric Jameson's highly contested phrase 'national allegory', if excised from the Jamesonian context of unguarded generalisation ('All third-world texts are necessarily [...] national allegories'), comes as an apt epithet for this poetry of the military era in Nigeria; in the specific sense of their historicity, the poets' works pose as national allegories.¹²

It is the contention of this book that these poets, in their artistic endeavours, and in their choices and struggles, were at that specific period negotiating their way through the appropriation and symbolic acquisition of social events and energies to speak to power in the form of military oppression. Michel Foucault's theory of power attends to the kind of dynamics that exists between the dominant hegemonic discourse of the military and the counter-hegemonic discourse of the poets. In his *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault points out that 'power is everywhere [...] because it comes from everywhere' (93); that is, there is no institution, group of individuals, or any sort of entity that has the monopoly of power. In Foucault's view, power can come from above; it can also come from below; it in fact has no permanent abode and is better viewed as a circulating phenomenon with a complex nature. Foucault goes ahead to declare that power 'is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (93). The military establishment in Nigeria actually thought it had and wielded power, but it soon became known to the actors of the establishment that power did not reside with them alone and that those who had appeared less powerful in the society, such as poets and writers, also had their own power, since they would always have to map out a 'strategical situation' for themselves when confronted with any condition in life. Elsewhere, Foucault states that '[the] most intense point of lives, the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely there where they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavour to utilise its forces or to escape its traps' ('The Life of Infamous Men', 80). The 1980s and the 1990s, the period of intense military oppression in Nigeria, was the 'intense point of lives' for these poets as they did not only clash with power in the form of pro-democracy demonstrations but also in the discursive form of protest poetry. It was imperative for these poets both to go and



protest on the streets, and to write subversive poetry because the military regime itself had the double strategy of physically assaulting the people, as reported in the media, and of using cultural or discourse means such as the mass media (radio, television, newspaper) to perpetrate anti-human activities and to promote itself. This cultural form of oppression was countered by the poetic discourse from these poets. The discourse form which the poets chose, since they had no guns to face the soldiers, is, in the long run, the most potent strategy in power relations. Sara Mills points out that '[p]articularly through their verbal dexterity and use of language, those who are not in economically powerful positions may nevertheless manage to negotiate for themselves fairly powerful positions in the hierarchy' (40). Through their powerful, threnodic tones, the military era poets dramatise quite vividly the level of subjugation the entire nation, including the cultural estate, is condemned to as a result of the dominating and brutal incursion of the military into governance; but in their threnody clearly stands out a forceful optimism that implies the poets' cultural prowess in not only standing up to the dreaded military oppressors but also foreseeing, and partaking in, the displacement of military oppression. Mills goes on to say 'discourses [...] are in constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority' (19). It is the discourse of military messianism, the very condition of possibility for the (mis)adventure of the military into governance in Nigeria, in Africa, that the poetic discourse confronts.

In the long run, the poetic category of the military era is a reaction, indeed a kind of repulsion, a counter-hegemonic one against what one might see as the hegemony of violence inflicted on the entire society by the powerful soldiers who imposed themselves in leadership positions during the prolonged army rule in Nigeria. The poetic act is then better regarded as a certain form of violence by the poets to counter the violence of the military. This demonstrates Frantz Fanon's theory of anti-violence violence powerfully orchestrated in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon believes that violence, especially from the seemingly powerful few against the masses can only be met by what he calls 'greater violence' (61), and he considers writers among the cultural activists of society who must aim their writing against dominating powers. When Fanon writes that '[the] poet ought [...] to understand that nothing can replace the reasoned, irrevocable taking up of arm on the people's side' (226), he implies that the poet, the writer and cultural activist must enlist himself as the people's defender and must see his work as a token of violence in the wider sphere of cultural anti-violence violence that must be waged to liberate the masses from a repressive regime of colonialism (during the colonial period) or of homegrown dictatorships in the third world nations. Fanon goes on to spell out that such a national literature powered by 'greater violence' against the violence unleashed by the establishment,

may be properly called a literature of combat in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (240)

It has been the conclusion of this book that the military era poetry is an instance of the counter-hegemonic violence enacted by the cultural estate in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s to repel the antics and heartlessness of military rulers that plundered Nigeria. Whether or not the word ‘general’ or ‘gun’ or ‘grenade’ is literary enough to earn a place in a poem does not matter; what matters is the desire to produce a dissident discourse. It is also no wonder that there are more poets in this era than any other in Nigeria, because modern poetry being that lyrical spark of emotional release comes in handy for spirited creative artists driven by the desire to confront institutional violence against the less privileged ones in society.

* * *

Given the emphasis of this book on the poetry’s interaction with the culture and history of military oppression in Nigeria – an interaction that sees the poetry not only feeding from the history but also feeding it, it is useful to contextualise the generational consciousness of these poets.

Chapter Two examines the issues surrounding the grouping of the new poets as a generation, despite this book’s favouring of the nomenclature ‘military era poets’. The next chapters concentrate on the modes of discourse within which the poets operate in raising their counter-discourse against the discourse of military oppression in Nigeria. Chapter Three examines the conceptualisation of poetry as a domain of political struggle by this crop of poets, following the tradition of protest writing they inherit from their precursors. Chapter Four foregrounds the deep elegiac tone, paradoxical because it aims to unseat power and is the poets’ ploy to attack the powerful institution of military oppression. In Chapter Five, attention is focused on the use of myth, both local and foreign, by these poets to challenge the myth of militarism. Chapter Six turns to the contribution of the female poets, through the feminist perspective, to the political struggle the crop of poets map out for themselves.

An important aspect of the poetic discourse of the military era poets is the question of the Niger Delta, the oil-producing area of Nigeria that was, as it were, under siege during those decades of dictatorship. Chapter Seven looks at the poetry of some Niger Delta indigenes who critique the condition of a heavily militarised



Niger Delta at the time. The last chapter calls attention to the emerging perspective in the post-military era poetry of this crop of writers, a perspective tied to the incident of emigration and self-exile among the poets in the heyday of military oppression.

Notes

1. It is clear from Soyinka's essay, of course, that he was mainly concerned with what he saw as the unspeakable state of dehumanisation in South Africa. But this was just one of the concerns. Soyinka, at this time in Nigeria, was also concerned about the events leading to the Nigerian civil war, because he took the war as his burden as a Nigerian, a writer, and an activist.
2. Antonio Gramsci identifies 'artistic writers and popular writers' as one of the non-coercive means through which hegemony manifests itself. The Gramscian concept of hegemony that this book is interested in undergirds a unified system of social formations such as that which we intend to argue in this book – the ideological yearning running through the poetic produce of this generation.
3. This sense of legitimacy is all-pervasive and, at its extreme, has given rise to what one may call commentarial creative writing in Nigeria; that is, creative writing that is so eager to thematise dominant social issues that it sometimes resembles a banal social document.
4. The phrase 'yet another' is indicative of the association of specific outputs of Nigerian literature in English with certain historical events, which is of methodological significance to this book. We associate the poetry we are dealing with here to the intense military oppression of the late 1980s to the late 1990s. This is not the first, but could be seen, as we hope to demonstrate, as the third of such literary formations in Nigeria.
5. Some of the notable poets of this generation are Toyin Adewale, Unoma Azuah, Amaritsero Ede, Lola Shoneyin, Afam Akeh, Uche Nduka, Remi Raji, Maik Nwosu, Ifowodo Ogaga, Abubakar Othman, Idris Amali, Moses Tsenongu, Maria Ajima, Chiedu Ezeanah, Obi Nwakanma, Abdullahi Ismail, B.M. Dzukogi, and many more others.
6. For a good comparative analysis of cultural materialism and new historicism, see John Brannigan's *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*; and Jeremy Hawthorn's *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in Contemporary Literary Debate*.
7. For some samples, see Remi Raji's preface to his *A Harvest of Laughters* entitled 'Reading the Shadow'; Chiedu Ezeanah's to his *The Twilight Trilogy* entitled 'In Praise of the Music in Us'; Nnimmo Bassey's 'Author's Note' to his *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood*; and Obi Nwakanma's 'Preface' to his *The Horsemen and Other Poems*.

8. In line with this fact, most, if not all, of these anthologies cannot be found in bookshops in Nigeria today. Most of them are out of print. They include *Poets in Their Youths* edited by Uche Nduka and Osita Ike; *A Volcano of Voices* edited by Steve Shaba; *25 New Nigerian Poets* edited by Toyin Adewale; *Let the Dawn Come: Voices from North-East Nigeria* edited by Idris O. Amali; *Five Hundred Nigerian Poets (Volume I)* edited by Jerry Agada; *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Nigerian Writing* edited by Nduka Otiono and Odo Okeyondo; *Crossroads: an Anthology of Poems in Honour of Christopher Okigbo* edited by Patrick Oguejiefor and Uduma Kalu; and *Pyramids: An Anthology of Poetry from Northern Nigeria* edited by Ismail Bala Garba and Abdullahi Ismaila.
9. 'The most efficient form of censorship,' Terry Eagleton writes, 'is, of course, the perpetuation of mass illiteracy' (*Criticism and Ideology* 58). This, in effect, is the form of censorship these poets faced – it is generally agreed that it was in the 1990s that educational structures in Nigeria finally crumbled under the weight of military despotism.
10. See Maik Nwosu (37–50), and Remi Raji (20–35).
11. Sometime in 2004 this researcher posed the question in an interview to the Nigerian fiction writer, Dul Johnson, about whether self-publishing seemed to have caused more harm than good for Nigerian writing. His response was that '[if] we don't publish, our culture, our lives, perish' (27). The researcher also posed a similar question in all the interviews conducted with some of the writers of this generation collected in the volume *In Their Voices and Visions: Conversations with New Nigerian Writers Vol. I*. (2007). It is also noteworthy that the question of self- or private-publishing as an anathema came to the fore of public discourse in Nigeria in 2004. During the inaugural presentation of the NLNG prize for literature in that year, the judges, unnamed, surprised the Nigerian literati when they announced that although three novels, namely, *Condolences* by Bina Nengi-Ilagha, *Fattening House* by Omo Uwaifo and *House of Symbols* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, did make it to the final list, none of them deserved the prize because of typographical and grammatical errors. They attributed this to the phenomenon of self- or private-publishing. This generated criticisms from some writers of this generation who thought it was a convenient, illogical, way of undermining the literary efforts of their time.
12. In his essay 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital', the American, Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson argues that all literary texts from developing worlds are necessarily concerned about the fate of the nation. Some scholars from the so-called third world have contested Jameson's claim, accusing it of being too reductionist. For a brilliant criticism of Jameson's views, see the chapter 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'' in Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*.



2

The Question of Generation

The decade that saw the emergence and the domestic consolidation of the generation, 1985–1995, was almost exclusively dominated by poets who emerged in parallel formations in the two cities that have acquired a reputation in Nigeria's literary history for being sites of generational beginnings: Ibadan and Nsukka.

— Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, 'Nigeria's Third-Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations.'

The writing career of this generation coincided with the virtual collapse of the publishing industry in Nigeria as a result of a serious economic recession, itself the repercussion of a grossly mismanaged economy [...]. The generation under review can aptly be described as the poets' generation. Close to three quarters of publications belong to the poetic genre [...].

— Niyi Osundare, *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture*

The poetry, or the group of poets, this study is concerned with might have appeared first in 1988, under the very suggestive title *Voices from the Fringe: An ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*, edited by the poet and scholar Harry Garuba, and simultaneously in what are now widely known as the Update collections.¹ The context in which this poetry is new is one that is not clear-cut in matters of theme and style or obvious paradigmatic shift; it is not that the new poets stylistically or thematically deviate from, or challenge, the existing matrix of the social moorings of Nigerian poetry.² In the 1980s, Garuba had noticed what he called a 'significant literary renaissance [...] especially in the genre of poetry' (*Voices from the Fringe*, xv) in Nigeria. As the coordinator of the famous Poetry Club of Ibadan, where undergraduates who wanted to become poets rubbed minds with their teacher-writers such as Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan, Garuba had his keen eye on the 'youngmen [sic] and women [...] writing and becoming increasingly frustrated by their inability to find publishing outlets for their works' (*Voices from the Fringe*, xv).³ It is thus such young men and women, those voices purportedly confined to the fringe, that form the contents of Garuba's anthology. The poetry therein acquired the nomenclature 'new Nigerian poetry' because the editor chose to (for him it was

rather ‘imperative’) to exclude any poet who had already published an individual collection (*Voices from the Fringe*, xvi). At the same time, new voices in poetry had also been heard at other university campuses across Nigeria, notably Nsukka (University of Nigeria), Zaria (Ahmadu Bello University), Maiduguri (University of Maiduguri), and Jos (University of Jos).⁴

But what Garuba had seen as a significant renaissance in poetry in Nigeria arguably began just after the civil war. It was indeed after the Nigerian civil war that Nigerian writing, perhaps in all genres, witnessed a certain renaissance due to the urgent desire of writers to challenge what they saw as the worst inhumanity to hit Nigeria, and the alarming ease with which politicians and businessmen, including privileged writers and intellectuals, profited from the situation. Nigerian scholars such as Olu Obafemi, Nesther Alu (198–203), Chidi Amuta (85–92) and Obi Maduakor (53–70), among many others, have identified the Nigerian civil war as that critical juncture in which Nigerian poetry did not only flourish but re-focused its artistic energies towards issues which affected the wellbeing of Nigeria. This, though, does not undermine earlier writers’ engagement with the question of cultural nationalism. Indeed, the concern with nationhood, as has been earlier pointed out quoting Achebe and Soyinka, is a crucial thematic construct of all generations of Nigerian writers.

But in Nigerian literature, modern writers in English are grouped into three generations for convenient categorization, namely the first, the second and the third.⁵ In terms of historical epochs, political and social contexts, these groups are also known as the pre-independence era, the post-independence era and what we may call the military era, which is the object of this enquiry. This general, often loose periodisation implies the thematic and stylistic preoccupation of a group of writers responding to a distinct circumstance, partaking in the same narrative, consciously or unconsciously gravitating towards a category of discourse. But it is pertinent to point out, following Harry Garuba (‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’, 51–72), that theme and style as markers of a specific literary period are obviously inadequate especially in modern African literatures because of their strong connection to a boundless extra-literary context. There is therefore a continuum that thwarts any attempt to neatly categorise Nigerian writing into specific eras. For instance, Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, prominent poets of the post-civil war era, widely regarded as the second generation, are still active and have also, along with the new poets, reconstructed the recent phenomenon of military oppression in Nigeria. In a way, most Nigerian poetry falls within what Remi Raji refers to as ‘the nationalist imagination’ (‘Interview’, 10). It is on this premise that Garuba, in delineating the different generations in Nigerian poetry, prefers to call the poets of the first generation – Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka – the ‘Modernist-Nationalists;’ and to call the second generation – Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, and Tanure Ojaide – the ‘Marxist-Nationalists.’ It



is that engagement with the nation, within the ambience of literary instrumentalism, that is still inherent in the works of the new poets, although as Garuba points out, the new poets have become strongly attracted to the tropes and topoi of dispersal, mostly manifest, as we will argue later, in what one may see as the second, and ongoing, phase of the poetic production of this generation. What has been seen as the first, second and third generations are in fact not generations in the strict sense of the word, but sub-categories or sub-traditions within a literary tradition, based on historical markers. Such periodisation purely on historical basis is germane, and does suggest what this researcher would alternatively call a poetic discourse category. This book then is concerned with the poetic discourse category of the military era or the third-generation sub-tradition.

The poetic production of the modernist-nationalists (the first generation) is characterised, mostly in matters of aesthetics, by its appropriation of tropes from traditional orature; and by its fascination with, response to, and integration of, the high modernism of Euro-America.⁶ Their aestheticisation of the rift between the modern and the traditional, the received and the local, with the desire to fashion an idiom – in a process that is no less than self-fashioning – results to what Abiola Irele calls ‘aesthetic traditionalism’ (*The African Imagination*, 57). The poetic discourse category of this era has a two-pronged purpose: on the one hand, it attempts to realise a counter-hegemonic objective in the form of a romantic reflection, representation, and valorisation of African cultures in line with such imposing ideologies as African nationalism and Negritude. Here we recall Okara’s negritudistic nostalgia expressed through powerful symbols such as ‘drum’ and ‘River Nun’. We recall the act of prodigality, of total submission, in Okigbo’s early poetry, highly evocative (in spite of its Christianisation) of the prehistoric time in Africa; and we recall also Soyinka’s obsession with Ogun as powerfully orchestrated in *Idanre and Other Poems*. On the other hand, there is the discourse attempt to capture, with a strong sense of commitment, of confrontation, what it sees as the inhumanity of colonialism, racism, and the entire gamut of Nigeria’s internal crises, mostly political, that befell the newly independent nation.⁷ But it does seem that the political dimension of their poetry is often ignored by critics and scholars eager to dismiss them as Euro-American modernists.

This group of poets, writers, and artists would face greater socio-political crisis, indeed disintegration, in the form of the Nigerian civil war.⁸ The consequences on their writings and on their personal lives were profound. Achebe would become a war minstrel for the secessionist region; Soyinka would be incarcerated and brutalised (as narrated in his memoir *The Man Died*); Okigbo, who chose to enlist in the Biafran army, would be killed in the war front.⁹ The poet J. P. Clark-Bedekeremo, who perhaps opted for a neutral stand, would face, through a legal battle, what he considered an attack on his personality when a poetry volume with the suggestive title *The Poet Lied* emerged.¹⁰ This debut volume by Odia Ofeimun,

a young man who had watched the events leading to the war, and how some artists, writers, and intellectuals, along with soldiers and politicians, had profited from the war, would become the cornerstone, as it were, of the generation to take over the literary scene in the aftermath of the war. It is a volume, as indicated in the title, which symbolically disputes the claim of the received poetic art, heavily influenced by modernism, to the cause of humanity. As Oyeniyi Okunoye points out, '[the] strong statement that the collection makes with regard to the primacy and urgency of the social responsibility of art inaugurated a generational shift in Nigerian poetry' ('The Margin or the Metropole?', 93). Ofeimun's controversial volume, in terms of its relevance to the shaping of a generation, was followed by Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace*, a collection of poems, like Ofeimun's, distinguished by its coherent thesis on the plight of the peasant and the poor. Included in this volume is a metapoem entitled 'Poetry Is' in which the poet, in a powerful, prescriptive tone, theorises what he considers to be poetry, and uncompromisingly stamps poetry as a people's craft meant to serve the society, to engage social maladies, to forge a common, positive vision for the people. Tanure Ojaide, who would later along with Ofeimun and Osundare form the popular trinity of their generation, had already in 1973 published *Children of Iroko and Other Poems*.

Osundare, who would later become, arguably, the leading figure of his generation, pontificates, beyond poetic practice, what to him and his contemporaries, constitutes the people's poetry. Perhaps his most sustained exposition is the essay 'The Writer as Righter'. Taking a broad overview of the concept of the engaged writer from the entrenched tradition of English (British) literature, the essay proceeds to deflect in Osundare's characteristic satiric tone the presumed cultural and artistic engagement of the modernist-nationalists. It faults their 'aesthetic traditionalism' as a self-fashioning project single-mindedly obsessed with a mythology that undermines both the people's plight, and the people's prowess to take their fate in their hand.¹¹ 'The Writer as Righter', along with other essays by the then emerging writers and critics, clears the space, as it were, for an artistic ideology that claims to favour (at the same time building itself into an hegemony) a radical return to artistry more traditional than the 'traditional aesthetics' of the Okigbo generation, and an overtly de-individualised thematic space that embraces only the estate of the masses.¹² The claim at the core of this ideology is a movement towards what was perceived as authentic African art, authenticity being rooted in traditional oral aesthetics. This notion is heavily influenced by the ideas put forward by Chinweizu and others in their polemical book *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*. The insistence in this book on a nativist conception of African poetry, and a preoccupation with 'public concerns' instead of the writer's 'puny ego' (Chinweizu et al., 252), paves way for the practice of the post-civil war writers whose most vocal exponent in fiction is Festus Iyayi, and in drama is Femi Osofisan.



But perhaps the most influential essay in announcing the second generation of poets is Funso Aiyejina's 'Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition.' Aiyejina (himself a poet of this order) announces the emergence of Ofeimun, Osundare and Ojaide, rightly projecting them as the voices of a new generation of poets, lauding their poetry for its concern with the condition of the masses. 'Ofeimun's concern with the oppressed,' Aiyejina writes, 'his anger at and impatience with opportunistic artists, public morality, cultural inadequacies, economic mismanagement [...] are qualities which he shares with Niyi Osundare' (122). He refers to Ojaide's poetry as 'philosophical musings [which looks] backward to tradition as well as inward to the present' (125). What is most remembered of Aiyejina's essay today is the second part of his title: 'An Alter-Native Tradition'. The essay, as this part of the title attempts to show, does not announce only what it considers as a new theme but also what it considers to be a more appealing style. In line with Osundare's metapoetic musing in 'Poetry Is', a poem that is now widely considered the manifesto of the second generation of poets à la William Wordsworth's 'Preface to Lyrical Ballad' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 'Niyi Osundare and the Poetic Statement of a Generation', 27–39), Aiyejina especially concentrates on the consideration of language in the new poetry, notably its purported use of simple diction and its claim to innovative (contra-Soyinka) appropriation of African traditional folklore or speech wisdom. The pun on 'alternative' (Alter-Native) is both poetic and theoretical; more theoretical because it underscores the proclaimed return to native literary wisdom in order to construct authentic poetic voices, and in order that poetry should mean (something) to all readers. This poetry earns the nomenclature 'marketplace poetry' from Nigerian literary scholars (Maduakor, 'Female Voices in Poetry', 75–91). Its ideological bent is easily identified as Marxist. Accounting for the Marxist nature of the works of these writers, Olu Obafemi in his insightful book *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* posits that

[their] work deals, urgently, with contemporary social problems in Nigeria with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present decadence [...] through their markedly different approaches, [they] advocate social revolution as the only way out of the country's present social incoherence. (168)

The Marxist exuberance of the Osundare-Ofeimun-Ojaide generation found greater theoretical grounds in the works of self-acclaimed Marxists scholars such as Biodun Jeyifo, Omafume F. Onoge, and Chidi Amuta. Amuta in his *Towards a Sociology of African Literature and The Theory of African Literature*, but especially in the latter, coherently lays out what he considers the most viable engagement of the writer – the avowed anxiety with the condition of Africa as a third world; and the insistence

that the engagement of the critic/scholar must be a fixation on a materialist reading of African creative works. These issues constitute the focal point of the essays collected in *Marxism and African Literature* edited by Georg M. Gugelberger; they seem to single out Wole Soyinka for critical bashing because he stands prominent among those the editor accuses of perpetuating what he calls ‘Euro- and Americo-centric literary views’ (v).

But the claims of the Marxist critics/scholars did not go uncontested. Apart from responses from writers themselves, most notably Soyinka, there were scholars, those in the so-called Formalist School of African literature, such as Dan Izevbye, Charles Nnolim, Donatus Nwoga, and Pius Olusegun Dada.¹³ What announced itself in the form of formalist conceptualisation and intellectualisation of literary criticism in Africa—with the strident voices of Lewis Nkosi and Kolawole Ogungbesan – crystallises in a collective attack on what was considered an undue subjection of African literature in European languages to socio-political commitment in the form of artistic banality.¹⁴ In an interview with Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Izevbye takes on the Alter-Native sub-tradition thus:

But I must say that from what I have read from many writers [of the Alter-Native era] there is a marked technical drop of technical excellence in the level of technical achievements, mastery of language and form which one has a right to expect of the successors to the literary tradition developed by Achebe, Soyinka, Clark and others. I think there is too much impatience, too little respect for form and especially for language. (Interview, 136)

Donatus Nwoga’s attitude is that a poet should not ‘vulgarize his [sic] inspiration and strategies’ (Interview 107) for the sake of any grand narrative. When in a 2006 article, Nnolim derides that ‘[the] failure of the Marxist/socialist ideologies to move African literature forward was resounding’ (6), he implies the aporetic conundrum, perceived even in the Alter-Native camp today, regarding the potency of the overt instrumentalisation of literature, given the confounding ascendancy of socio-political crises in Africa today. In spite of such criticisms, however, the Alter-Native sub-tradition – with some of the poets Osundare, Ofeimun, and Ojaide still active today – has had, more than the sub-tradition of modernist-nationalists, a far-reaching influence on the institutionalisation of the military era poets.¹⁵

Thus, the poetry in *Voices from the Fringe* is not new in the manner that the poetry of the trio of Osundare, Ofeimun, and Ojaide, placed against the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark-Bedekeremo and Wole Soyinka, may be considered *new* (here, a matter of purely stylistic consideration). The anthology does indeed introduce unknown poets who later turn out to be fairly productive in the 1990s and at the turn of the new millennium. One fundamental factor in any mapping of the poetry of these new voices from the fringe, and of their post-1988 poetic



production, is the socio-political tension under which the poets laboured. It does seem that Garuba relies heavily on this factor to make a case for the generational shift in the introduction to his anthology. Insofar as one focuses on the intensity of the tension (that is, if the oppressive regimes of the late 1980s and of the 1990s, the twin regimes of Babangida and Abacha are considered), the poetry of the 1988 poets yields a (but not-so-remarkable) shift in the paradigm of socio-political discourse in Nigeria's literary landscape. But here too the issue is problematic, and has indeed been problematised by scholars, such as Titi Adepitan (124–128) and Stewart Brown ('Still Daring the Beast', 97–113), who think the new poets may have emerged labouring under socio-political anxiety but they may not have responded more than, or in a different way, from the way earlier poets such as Osundare and Ofeimun have responded to it. Nevertheless, any characterisation of this poetry must, in the view of this researcher, focus on a historicism that provides a cultural domain that conflates diverse narratives.

The incursion of the Nigerian military into governance dates back to the 1960s, barely five years after Nigeria got its independence from Britain. The coups and counter-coups stretched to 1993 when the late General Sani Abacha, regarded as the most feared despot in Nigeria, took over power.¹⁶ The period between the 1980s and the 1990s, the decades these poets came on the scene, was characterised (at least from what the Nigerian media reported) by a peak of repression and woes. General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida seized power in a successful coup from General Muhammadu Buhari in 1985. Before he took over, Nigerians were already groaning under the dictatorship of General Buhari whose very notorious Decree Two had hounded journalists and activists into prison without trials. In a populist move, General Babangida struck Decree Two out and endeared himself to Nigerians. But, alas, it was during his regime that journalism received the harshest blow: the parcel bomb killing of Dele Giwa, then considered one of the finest journalists in Nigeria. Every stage of General Babangida's eight-year rule, as obvious in the media, brought harsher blows on common Nigerians. He introduced the IMF-directed Structural Adjustment Programme and Nigeria further degenerated into a hopeless state. His so-called transition to democracy was fraught with his own insincerity and manipulations, resulting in the truncation of the 12 June 1993 general elections which, many believed, would have ushered in the late M.K.O. Abiola as an elected president. The annulment of the elections was devastating precisely because Nigerians had waited too long to embrace democracy. This is how the journalist Kunle Ajibade captures it:

The country, particularly the South West, erupted in anger. Many people took to the streets in protest. The soldiers mowed down about four hundred protesters in Lagos alone. The more people the soldiers killed, the more defiant the people became. Many Nigerians were now afraid that there would be another civil war. For that reason, a lot of them travelled to their home states in panic. Many died on the way. (*Jailed for Life*, 9)

Faced with overwhelming oppositions, reading the handwriting on the wall, as it were, General Babangida, in his own words, ‘stepped aside’ (see Ajibade, 10). The dictatorship of General Babangida was, however, to be perceived as milder than that of the late General Abacha who took over barely three months after the former had left. General Abacha was noted for his dark glasses and no-nonsense stance. It was believed that he had no qualms about throwing a legion of activists and protesters into prison. Against international outcries, General Abacha was said to have personally monitored the judicial murder of the writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Prominent activists such as Kudirat Abiola and Chief Alfred Rewane were killed by unknown gunmen in daylight.

The dictatorships of General Babangida and the late General Abacha, according to social commentators, turned out to be the worst in Nigerian history. There were all kinds of killings reported in the media: parcel bombing, frequent bombing of public places, hanging, shooting, and dying in prisons. There was a heavy, oppressive silence in the land. Arthur Agwuncha Nwankwo writes of the period:

We have witnessed an escalation in armed robbery, and today, a circle of violence envelops us all. The state has mindlessly turned against its citizens, murdering them for expressing their views. Violence has begotten more violence. Nigerians live under continuous fear for their lives. Their psyche is scarred by the siege mentality. (30)

In this state of anomie, writers, journalists, intellectuals, and human rights activists who are inevitably the Santrofi Anoma of their society were worst hit.¹⁷ Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, seen as an epitome of literary excellence in Nigeria, was declared the arch-enemy of the nation and, as reported in the media, would have been killed if he had not escaped abroad.¹⁸ In her introduction to *25 New Nigerian Poets*, an anthology that emerged directly out of this perilous period to be the successor to *Voices from the Fringe*, Toyin Adewale echoes Garuba by drawing attention to the condition of the new poets and writers:



Some young Nigerian writers [...] chose to go into voluntary exile. Literary groups petered out. The publishing sector sneered at Nigerian creative literature rejecting it as unprofitable and chose instead to publish school textbooks and self-serving biographies of retired and serving army generals.
(iii)

Steve Shaba in his editor's note to the 1999 anthology of poems *A Volcano of Voices* had earlier presented the same condition. It was an act of bravery to write in this period; and this bravery constituted an integral part of their *active* poetic discourse to deflect the existing social order.¹⁹

Being born in/around the year of independence (most of the poets were born in the 1960s), and having witnessed the Nigerian oil boom of the 1970s in their teenage years, becoming adults and usually university graduates in the Nigerian oil doom of the 1980s and 1990s, the poets this book is concerned with in this book are naturally, it seems, or as they themselves claim (see Azuah, 24–35), part of the massive victimhood of the viperous military despotism of those decades. In the context of oppressive regimes, they viewed and really conceived their poetry, which they did not write in comfortable conditions befitting writers, as their contributions to the politico-cultural struggles (embodied in other artistic modes such as music and painting) to contest the hegemony of military oppression. Like South African writers during apartheid, most of the Nigerian poets of the military era claimed they were hurt into writing; in fact the process of crafting verse and publishing it, as strenuous and as censored as it was (see for example Raji, 20–35) constituted, apart from their styles and themes, the whole process of *signification* of the poetic text.²⁰

Literary Tradition, Influence, Anxiety

There is so far no generation in Nigerian literature in English that has produced poetry like the one studied here; most of the writers on the scene are poets.²¹ Any study of this generation's poetry as a cultural signification would benefit from contextualising it within the substantially elaborate literary tradition in Nigeria since the beginning of modern writing in English. As it is obvious to us so far, an established tradition, a visible intertextuality of a politically staged artistry has been long inaugurated in Nigeria – from the anti-colonial nationalism of the pre-independence period, to the blunt cynicism of the independence moment typified most rudely in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* first presented at the first Nigeria's Independence Day, and to the ascendancy of the post-civil war Marxism.

The peak of this abiding, indissoluble connection between art and politics, or narrative and culture, is the heydays of the Alter-Native sub-tradition. Within this artistic-ideological space, the question of nationhood, the notion of social

commitment, the perception of audience-factor, and the conception of social semiotics inscribe themselves at the core of what would be seen as a democratisation ('demystification' is the popular idiom) of a craft motivated, if not compelled, by social exigencies. The most powerful strategy of the Alter-Native sub-tradition is the projection of the carnivalesque spectacle where very common activities or performances by the ordinary people, often disregarded as non-subject in poetry, acquire poetic values mainly because they better *perform* the discourse category, and also because they dramatise more vividly the much-theorised paradigm shift. The artistic works of this Alter-Native era prefer to absorb, or to textually stage, everyday activities of the ordinary people; that is, the *energia* circulated in and by these works is purely carnivalesque in the sense Bakhtin conceives it. The concept of carnivalesque, or carnival, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais, is hinged on three important factors: ritual and comic shows the type displayed in the marketplace, verbal parodies, and the popular, widely known, manner of swearing and cursing. Bakhtin, for instance, talks of laughter, among other ordinary things common to the masses, as agreeable, collectivising, but also transgressive. 'Carnival laughter,' he writes, 'is the laughter of all the people [...], this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (*Rabelais and His World*, 8).²² The use of laughter by Osundare in his *Waiting Laughters*, arguably one of the most trenchant pieces of poetic discourse to emerge out of the Alter-Native order is, for instance, better understood as a staging of the carnivalesque spectacle. It is thus in that carnivalesque formation that the earthy, marketplace idiom of the post-war poetry; the de-mythologised, quasi-Brechtian aesthetics of the post-war drama; and the realistic, almost journalistic, fiction and faction of the post-war prose in Nigeria constitute themselves into a veritable sub-tradition. It is pertinent to point out that the choice of this strategy by Osundare and others is informed by the desire to disrupt the existing cultural signs (African modernism, Negritude), an indication that culture as a *logosphere* in Nigeria is a domain of active contestation.

The foregoing suggests for us the premise that the military era poets or writers, the third generation, as late comers, find themselves in a cultural sphere where conflict already exists. To find their voices and assert themselves in this sphere implies an active participation in the social semiology of this literary tradition. As part of the further conflict their entry generates, tensions develop between them and the older voices, resulting in them becoming more conscious of themselves as a generation. The older and the younger writers clash in a polemic, not unusual of inter-generational relations. This concerns the influences of the new generation's writers, the artistic worth of their writing and their social visions, among other things. It does seem that the older writers, firmly rooted in the Nigerian literary tradition, are inclined to prescribe what the new writers should write or the mode of expression that they consider more authentic to an African writer. Clearly, this



turns out to be the force that every literary tradition is wont to exert on new writers. Raymond Williams identifies the overbearing force of a literary tradition when he writes, 'tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert, historicized segment; indeed it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation' (*Marxism and Literature*, 115). But the conflict between the older and the younger writers has a double nature, one that is rather paradoxical: on one hand, the older writers complain that the younger writers imitate their (older writers') works; on the other hand, they see the younger writers as straying too far from the literary tradition.

The question of imitation – that the new writers cannot evolve their own voices; that their poetry comes through as nothing other than the footnote of the poetry of the Alter-Native order, i.e. the second generation – is, to some extent, overblown, even sensationalised by such newspaper headlines as 'New Nigerian Poets are Copycats'.²³ It is after all true that poets such as Remi Raji and Akeem Lasisi, among others, are in their early poetry heavily influenced by Osundare and Soyinka; it is also true that Maik Nwosu and Obi Nwakanma, among others, are heavily influenced by Okigbo and Soyinka. But the influencing, and its manifestation in the works of the younger poets, is itself a process of self-immersion where a literary tradition, conceived as an ideologically active part of culture, attracts and absorbs upcoming writers. The new Nigerian poets are already inclined to the ideological persuasion of the Alter-Native sub-tradition not only because most of the Alter-Native poets taught them, or because the carnivalesque aesthetics of the sub-tradition attracts them, but mainly because, like the Alter-Native poets, the political condition of the society over-determines their artistic expressions.²⁴

This, then, is what emphatically asserts the interconnectedness of voices and visions in Nigerian writing, regardless of genre, aesthetic idiosyncrasy, and cultural location. This interconnectedness – whether in the form of the younger writers imitating the older ones or not – can be explained in two ways. It has first to be examined from a social dimension, and here Bakhtin's notion of social semiotics is useful. In what is considered as the second phase of his work, the so-called Leningrad period (1924–1929), Bakhtin fully develops his idea of the linguistic sign that is unreservedly implicated in social reality. Against Ferdinand de Saussure's theory which conceives of language in terms of *langue* and *parole*, with greater emphasis on the former, Bakhtin in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* totally ignores *langue* and views language as originating from the phenomenon of social interactions synchronically and diachronically.²⁵ He thus considers any statement, whether literal or literary, as an utterance. In contrast to Sigmund Freud's postulation that an utterance is a product of an individual's deep consciousness, Bakhtin contends that every utterance is a product of the society where it emerges; it is the result of the speaker's earlier interactions with other speakers and the concrete social situations in which these speakers find

themselves. Bakhtin's term for this is dialogism. As commentators on Bakhtin's work (Michael Holquist, Michael F. Bernard-Donals, and Jurgen Pieters) have pointed out, dialogism for Bakhtin is conceived in two senses. Dialogism is first seen, in Jurgen Pieters's words, 'as a cultural phenomenon that occurs in the social relationships between different individuals towards each other and towards the socio-historical reality in which they find themselves' (155). The second sense is a linguistic one which acknowledges different voices in a particular linguistic situation, what Bakhtin himself calls polyphony. The Nigerian cultural domain or social text (to echo Julia Kristeva) is anchored on dialogism, whether in the first sense or in the second sense. One factor continuously influencing this social text is the leadership failure that Nigeria continues to experience. Most writers in Nigeria, especially in the period this book is concerned with, see themselves in contact or exchange with this political reality, shaping it, historicising it, textualising it as part of their imaginative endeavour. They find themselves thematising the same issues, relating to each other intertextually (such as the intertextuality between Osundare's 'Poetry Is' and Esiaba Irobi's 'The Lagoon' and Afam Akeh's 'The Living Poem'), inevitably drawing their linguistic signs from the same social text (mass media, music, social activism). In this practice it is hard not to see the poets and writers as writing about the same thing, using similar diction. They are engaged in dialogism both in the sense that they are in the same geo-political setting and in the sense that they dwell within the same social semiotic space. The dimension of orality accentuates this phenomenon. The poets return to their oral sources, as Ojaide (*Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, 11) points out, to sometimes root their voices in their traditional aesthetics; the result is that poets from the same source tend to seem imitative of each other. The belated poets, like Raji and Lasisi, would seem to imitate older poets, such as Soyinka and Osundare, because they all return to the Yoruba language oral sources. While this may seem overstated, it is undeniable that an intertextual reading of their poetry would reveal the deep structure of interconnectedness that would situate them as similar variants of the many ongoing transformations within Yoruba orality.

The other explanation for the interconnectedness in the voices of Nigerian poets would be from the psychological perspective, and here we turn for theoretical support to Harold Bloom's work. Bloom's concept of anxiety of influence is useful if we ignore his apotheosising Shakespeare, and his de-contextualising of the poem. Influenced by Nietzsche and Freud, Bloom theorises in his *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading* that a poet, caught in the influential, unending, powers of earlier poetic text, struggles as a belated poet to create his own poetry, or his voice, through the misreading or misprision of the earlier poetic text or its authors. Through six processes, what he calls revisionary ratios (clinamen, tessera, kernosis, daemonization, askesis, apophrades), Bloom's theory foregrounds the rather inestimable tension, manifested through the psycho-artistic struggle



surrounding influence between two poets, one being the precursor, the early comer, and the other being the ephebe, the late comer. Bloom calls this struggle agon. It is the bitter effort, the impossible exertion, the palpable frustration, contained in the act of misprision undertaken, consciously or unconsciously, by the late comer. In this struggle, influence (as an act of misreading) becomes, in Bloom's words, 'a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships – imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological – all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most [...] is that the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation' (*The Anxiety*, xxiii). Influence is thus produced in the struggle to be and not to be; in the poetic text that results from the clash between the creative will and force of a new poet and the settled, established, canon of the precursor's output. Bloom explains that

[what] writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be idiosyncratic, and it is almost certain to be ambivalent, though the ambivalence may be veiled. (*The Anxiety*, xxiii)

Of course, poets, writers, whether upcoming or established, necessarily admire and (mis)read the works of earlier writers they consider inspirational to them. With African traditional poetics, this is even glaring as the ephebe does not only vocalise anxiety, but does in fact credit, even glorifies, the earlier poet or griot for having, through their own anxiety-struggle, created the artistic space in which the ephebe finds himself. For instance, it is almost unarguable that the oral performer does not claim the exclusivity of authorship; they understand that they happen to be the next performer in a continuum of performances; they often acknowledge and encompass the diverse voices that are visible in this continuum. In his study of dialogism in eastern African oral poetry, Kimani Njogu points out that '[any] given performance is a re-telling of previous performances. It is also a response to possible performances. Performances encapsulate relationships that exist between the performer, the text, and the audience' (96). For the oral poet, it seems, the misprision is not strong, and there is less or no initiation, instigation of defence mechanism the type often dramatised in the modern written poet's disquiet, or *angst*, about out-performing their precursor.

But of more interest to this study is Bloom's emphasis, insistently and consistently, on the causative function of (the anxiety of) influence in the evolution and life-process of a literary tradition. 'Literary tradition,' Bloom writes, 'begins when a fresh author is simultaneously cognizant not only of his own struggle against the forms and presence of a precursor, but is compelled also to a sense of the precursor's

place in regard to what came before him' (*A Map of Misreading*, 32). Within every literary tradition, therefore, there is a tussle, what one may call a power struggle, between the precursor and the ephebe. For Bloom, '[p]oetic tradition [...] is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since the strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves' (5). Each incident of misprision, in whatever degree, energises and relativises the entire tradition – tradition here being the artistic domain that facilitates the clash between the artistic egos of the precursor and the ephebe. While emphasis in Bloom's theoretical thrust is placed on the relationship between the precursor (seen, from the point of his appropriation of the Athenian *apophrades*, as a dead man) and the ephebe, and on his insistence on what he calls 'strong poets' (those he calls 'weaker' poets are, in his view, incapable of misprision), this researcher's appropriation of this theory is predicated on the position that misprision can and does happen between poets separated by a generational discrimination based, as it were, on mere historical periodisation, or even between poets of the same generation that seek to erect aesthetic individualism. The researcher's use is also hinged on the conviction that any such canonical epithet as 'strong poet' is diversionary, and offers nothing useful, even in the objective sense, to the aesthetic mould of a poem, the very subject-matter of anxiety. For, the focus, as Bloom himself strongly points out, is on the text. '[I]nfluence-anxiety,' he writes, 'is an anxiety achieved in and by the [...] poem' (*The Anxiety*, xxiii).

Anxiety of influence, as Bloom conceives it, and as this researcher understands it, does not in any way imply imitation in the derogatory sense of the word. It rather attempts to account for the strength of interconnected artistic visions either within a given historical period or across given historical periods. Bloom, for instance, notes that 'poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better' (*The Anxiety*, 7). The poetry of those derogatorily considered Euro-Modernist in Nigerian writing (Okigbo, Soyinka, Clark-Bedekeremo) should rather be seen as the misprision of the poetry, or aesthetic category, that inspire them into writing. The cornerstone of this argument is that no poet writes without reading earlier poets; that is to say, no one can be a poet without reading poetry. The trio of Okigbo, Soyinka, and Clark-Bedekeremo did not set out, or struggle, to write *like* the (modernist) poets they read, but to write *better* than them. This is the basis of their domesticating their modernism within the African aesthetics. Their work, as Irele points out, is rooted in their native tradition because they seek to strengthen their modernist skills, so to say, through traditional aesthetic appeals that ultimately make their works unique (in the sense of blending modernism and traditionalism) if juxtaposed with modernist poetry. This artistic sub-tradition (the blend of modernism and traditionalism) in turn constitutes the precursor of the Alter-Native poetry which, in its anxiety, seeks to outdo its precursor in traditionalism. In this sense, Osundare's



poetry is simply a misprision of Soyinka's as it *fights* all through its life-process to be even more traditional than Soyinka's aestheticisation of the Yoruba myths. Osundare's misprision of Soyinka entails the former's rejection of mythopoeia, what is considered as Soyinka's sophisticated tropological compass, and an acceptance of people-oriented art. The misreading actually takes place when Osundare *thinks* Soyinka has not written people-oriented poetry (even though Soyinka has) and has not used simple diction (Osundare himself infrequently uses simple diction), and that he would do it the way Soyinka would/could not have done it. Indeed the agon (debates, disputes) between Soyinka's generation of poets and Osundare's mostly centres on the medium of composition, as we have earlier recounted and is nothing other than the manifestation of the anxiety of influence, the clearing of space. Senayon S. Olaoluwa points this out in an essay when he writes, '[the] truth is that the selection of the medium of composition was also a space clearing strategy of their [Alter-Native poets] vocation' (469).

The clearing of space by the military era generation occurs in two ways. The first, more visible, comes from poets like Uche Nduka, Ismail Bala Garba, Toyin Adewale, and Chiedu Ezeanah, (but most especially Nduka), who insist, against the rhetoric of orality by the Alter-Native, that a written modern poem should distinguish itself from any undue *oralitisation* of verse, a symptom, in their view, of translating (and transposing) traditional poems and proverbs from native languages into English. What Osundare and Ojaide do, in the view of these ephebes, is to merely lift proverbs and songs from their traditional oral culture and put them on pages of papers. In the sphere of thematics, the ephebes think the Alter-Native poets are parochial, a symptom, in their view, of the Marxism that seems to over-determine the world views of most of the Alter-Native poets. Perhaps the most sustained expression of space clearing by the military era generation is Nduka's 1989 essay entitled 'Ideology, Individual, Poetry: Observations' in which he declares 'it has been part of the literary lunacy [a very strong word here] of Nigerian writing to make ideology a fetish' (10). He sees the poetry of the Alter-Native poets as 'depthless art' that would be forgotten in 'the compost heap of our literary culture' (10). Nduka writes of ideology here in the classical Marxist sense, the sense that pervades the practice of the Alter-Native poets: '[when] only socio-political issues are steadily highlighted over and above other issues and experiences, a cramping atmosphere manifests itself' (10). The second act of agon between the Alter-Native poets and the military era poets is demonstrated in the works of Maik Nwosu, Remi Raji, and Emman Usman Shehu. These ephebes, obviously enchanted by their precursor's use of lore and mythology, do not altogether step out of the domain of orality; instead they broaden their perceptions and deploy orality not in that overarching manner, or fundamentally aesthetic routine, as the Alter-Native poets such as Osundare and Ojaide have done. In other words, orality is rather *subterranean* in their works. In space clearing rhetoric, these poets, like Nduka,

would harp on the freedom a poet should, *must*, have to exercise their craft, and that craft itself has to be versatile; some of these poets, especially Nwosu, seem to return to the protean modernism of Okigbo and Soyinka.²⁶ But it is pertinent to point out that space clearing and its rhetoric by the military era poets seem to be heavily blighted, as it were, by the hegemonic force of the literary tradition, in which case their desire to deviate fails to fully manifest itself. For instance, Nduka, responding *naturally* to the prevalent social event of his society, finds himself enmeshed, as his first two collections demonstrate, in the very ‘ideology’ he rails against. It becomes clear that the ephebes and the precursors are responding to the same social order, and thus emphatic similarities (in theme, in style, in tone, in trope, even in diction) must come to rule their individual works.

The inter-generational tension would also emerge as a form of critical disapproval from the older writers and critics who basically insist on imposing the hegemony of their discourse category (modernist nationalism, Alter-Native order) on the new writers. The two prominent examples of this phenomenon are Charles Nnolim’s evaluative criticism of the new writers in a paper he presented to the Imo State branch of Association of Nigerian Authors entitled ‘New Nigerian Writing: Between Debauchery and Kitchen’; and Osundare’s 2005 essay, ‘Soyinka and the Generations After’. Reading some of the new novels published in recent times, notably *Alpha Songs* by Maik Nwosu, *Dreams Die at Twilight* by Wale Okediran, and *Fattening House* by Omo Uwaifo, Nnolim decries what he sees as the absence of the heroine/hero in contemporary Nigerian fiction, an absence he sees, first, as the result of the pervasive encroachment of the consequences of the military misrule into the domain of high culture; and, second, as the inability, as it were, of the new Nigerian writers to escape such consequences and produce what he sees as fiction of authentic, nationalistic heroism. In his view, the military era novel, in contrast to the first generation Nigerian novel with which he is most familiar, only depicts ‘a people adrift, hedonistic, cowed finally by the long incursion of the military in the body politic.’²⁷ Nnolim is obviously looking out for heroes such as Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* in the third-generation Nigerian novel; this he does not find and thus concludes that the third-generation Nigerian novel is aesthetically inferior to the novels of the previous generations.

Osundare expresses his worry over what he sees as the poor quality of literary language among military era poets who have had the tendency to globalise their diction to the detriment of literary language flavoured with local orature for which his own poetry and that of his contemporaries are well known. To him, the present generation of Nigerian writers are so fascinated by the idea of the shrunken world as a global village that they give themselves up to what he calls the ‘CNN syndrome’; that is, looking outside their land instead of inside for creative inspiration and craft. He thus declares that



there is a hip hop hysteria in the present atmosphere: an exogeneist mentality that urges one to take leave of one's very self and assume the borrowed, clinched mask of the foreign other. Many, many members of the new generation are doing to our literature what Islamic and Christian fundamentalists have done to our indigenous religion and cultural integrity. (22)

Osundare's essay is provocative and indicts some important poets of the military era for abandoning the aesthetics of African poetry, which, according to Tanure Ojaide, should 'involve the distinctive styles and rhythms that convey the African experience' (*Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, 17). It does seem quite clear that both Nnolim and Osundare, in posing as critics of the military era writing, are only expressing the hegemonic power of the discourse category of their generations: Nnolim prescribes a hero in the form of Okonkwo or a heroine in the form of Efurū; Osundare, on the other hand, prescribes a poetics typical of the Alter-Native sub-tradition.

If the evaluative, judgemental, criticisms of Nnolim, Osundare and some of their contemporaries, as destructive as they seem to be, as constructive as they claim to be, are aimed at prodding the military era writing towards certain ideological formations, a rather needless venture, they only provoke frenzied responses among the new writers, which further betray what the scholar Tony Afejuku sees as the rudderless nature of the new Nigerian writing.²⁸ The position of some of the new writers is in fact weakened by the views of some of their contemporary critics such as the views of Titi Adepitan expressed in 'Issues in Recent African Writing'; of Obakanse Lakanse articulated in 'The Failings of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry'; and of this researcher in 'Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: Between Commitment and Aesthetics'. Lakanse, for instance, laments that '[t]here is an uncreative temper and explicitness in the poems that are being rammed into our throats, leaving very little to chew on' (2). He is worried by what he sees as the shallowness of the diction of contemporary Nigerian poetry in English.

But there have been defences of the new writing as well. In an essay entitled 'Europhonism, Universities and Other Stories: How Not to Speak for the Future of African Literatures', aimed at deflecting Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ideological position on the question of language in African literature in European languages, the Canada-based Nigerian scholar, Pius Adesanmi, himself a poet of the military era, contextualises the new generation, pointing out the overwhelming challenges it has had to face, and he accuses the established canon of neglecting the artistic energies of the new Nigerian writing. He contends that '[our] generation dominated the Nigerian literary scene throughout the nineties but has very little to show for it in terms of critical attention. Nigeria's army of established literary critics in American universities are especially guilty of this surprising neglect' (123). This claim, finger-pointing as it is, is contestable, and is in fact contested by arguments such as Nnolim's

other accusation that contemporary (i.e., military era) Nigerian scholars and critics are lazy because they fail to critique the writing of their own generation.²⁹ Similarly, Bernth Lindfors also thinks the critics of the new generation are better equipped to discourse its literary outputs (see Otiono, 20–32). Nduka Otiono's apologia, following Adesanmi, is expressed in his introduction to the anthology *Camouflage: The Best of Contemporary Nigerian Writing*. Entitled 'Of Chameleon and Gods: a Generation in Search of New Idioms', Otiono's piece rehashes the points earlier made by Adesanmi and others (self-glorification for literary production in the face of anomie, critical inattention, generational self-pity), and, in his bid to map out what he thinks is new or special with this generation, privileges performance poetry in a tone that suggests this is the first time performance poetry is discovered in Nigerian poetry in English, which is not the case. In a move for the critics and scholars of this generation to engage with the writings of their contemporaries, Adesanmi and the South African scholar Chris Dunton edited a special issue of the South African journal *English in Africa* (volume 32, number 1) in which the mapping of the generation is perhaps first done. Although Adesanmi and Dunton, in their introduction, note that the first decade of the emergence of this generation is dominated by poetry, they conclude that 'the novel has arguably overtaken poetry to become the face – especially in international circuits – of third generation of Nigerian writing' (11). This appears to discount the ever-increasing production of poetry within and outside Nigeria by this generation, its canon-making dimension; and diverts attention to the West-based deterministic conditionalities (prizes, hyper-publicity) that have constituted themselves into the fashioner of Nigeria's canon. If the novel is seen to be instituting itself as 'the face' of the new generation, it is the result of certain domineering factors one of which is the dedication of a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (volume 39, number 2) to the novel – at the time of writing this book none has been dedicated to poetry – edited, again, by Adesanmi and Dunton. It is scholars outside Nigeria and the symbolic capital calling the shots of cultural production in Africa that have evidently contributed to making the novel 'the face' of this generation.

The third-generation poets are still writing, though the zeal and the generational consciousness with which they emerged during the military era have waned. At the height of the military era, and also at the turn of the twenty-first century, most of them emigrated from Nigeria. Notable voices of the generation such as Olu Oguibe, Uche Nduka, Afam Akeh, Unoma Azuah, Maik Nwosu, Obiwu, among many others, are now living and working in Europe and the United States. Their exodus out of Nigeria is a fraction of the brain-drain phenomenon that hit Nigeria in the late 1990s when Nigerian society became very hostile to intellectuals and writers. An interesting turn in the work of the third generation of Nigerian poets, as captured in Chapter Eight of this book, is the engagement with the question of exile. While they are still concerned with political happenings in Nigeria, they pay



greater attention to the paradox of exile – namely that the paradisaical condition of life envisaged in other lands is mostly a mirage; the crisis of multiculturalism; and the question of double-identity.

Notes

1. The Update poets and their collections are Emman Usman Shehu, *Questions for Big Brother*; Afam Akeh, *Stolen Moments*; Uche Nduka, *Flower Child*; Izia Ahmad, *A Shout across the Wall*; Esiaba Irobi, *Cotyledons*; and Kemi Atanda-Ilori, *Amnesty*. These collections came on the scene with the intervention of the Association of Nigerian Authors in collaboration with the defunct Update Communications Ltd, the publisher of the then widely circulated newspaper, *National Concord*.
2. It is important to point out that some of the poets today classified as ‘third-generation poets’, i.e. the post-1988 poets have challenged this matrix. Notable among them are Uche Nduka and Ismail Bala Garba.
3. The Poetry Club at the University of Ibadan produced some of the major poets of this era. The Poetry Club had the momentum to do so because it was led by such remarkable literary minds as Niyi Osundare, one of the finest poets from Nigeria today; Femi Osofisan, an established playwright who also wrote poems under the pseudonym Okinba Launko; and Harry Garuba, himself a respected poet and scholar. For more on this see Femi Osofisan’s *The City as Muse: Ibadan and the Efflorescence of Nigerian Literature*; Remi Remi’s ‘Ibadan and the Memory of a Generation: From the Poetry Club to the Premier Circle’ (20–35).
4. *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, established by Chinua Achebe, based at Nsukka, was/is a medium quite instrumental to the dissemination of the works of some of these new writers. For more on this see Maik Nwosu’s ‘Children of the Anthill: Nsukka and the Shaping of Nigeria’s 1960s Literary Generation’ (37–50). For more on the activities of the poets at Maiduguri, and possibly the other parts of northern Nigeria, see Idris Amali’s introduction to the anthology, *Let the Dawn Come: Voices from North-East Nigeria*.
5. There has been a debate on whether it is right to refer to this generation of Nigerian writers as the third generation or not. One school insists that given the emphasis on modern, post-*Things Fall Apart* Nigerian writers, this generation is the third. Another school posits that for a proper historiography of Nigerian literature, this generation is not the third but the fifth. For details of the argument, see Harry Garuba’s ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry’ (51–72); and Obiwu’s ‘The History of Nigerian Literature, 1772–2006’ (37–43).
6. It is pertinent to point out, *contra* Chinweizu et al., that these poets – Okigbo, Soyinka, and Clark-Bedekeremo – were not really fixated with Euro-American modernism; they were in fact experimenting by subjecting the received tradition to the matrices of African orality and mythology.

7. For more on the generation of this poets, and writers generally, see the first chapter of Biodun Jeyifo's study of Wole Soyinka, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*; chapters three and nine of F. Abiola Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. See also Donatus Nwoga's *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*; James Gibbs's *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*; Oyeniyi Okunoye's 'Captives of Empire: Early Ibadan Poets and Poetry' (105–123); Robert Fraser's *West African Poetry: A Critical History*; and Martin Banham's *Nigerian Student Verse*.
8. Other prominent names of this group include Amos Tutuola, Demas Nwoko, Duro Ladipo, Michael Echeruo, Mabel Shegun, and Flora Nwapa.
9. Chinua Achebe was also a prominent think-tank for the Biafran war; for details see Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*. For more details on Soyinka's incarceration see his prison memoir, *The Man Died*. For more on Okigbo's involvement on the war, see Obi Nwakanma's *Christopher Okigbo 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight*.
10. As soon as *The Poet Lied* by Odia Ofeimun appeared on the literary scene, J.P. Clark-Bedekeremo declared that the title of the collection pointed uncomfortably at him and thus threatened to sue the publisher. Intimidated, the publisher withdrew the book from circulation. But this scandalous situation informed the book's early popularity among the literati in Nigeria.
11. It is vital to quote Osundare at length here:

The next cause of the writer's silence concerns his 'art'. Nourished on the 'art for art's sake' culture, instructed to hone his diction, polish his syntax and leave politics to the politicians, many African writers walked the straight narrow way of their 'art'. The result is evident everywhere in the pioneer Nigerian writers: Soyinka's *Idanre and Other Poems* is an elaborate celebration of mythic lore; even where one stumbles upon potentially political poems such as 'For Fajuyi' and 'For Segun Awolowo', the socio-political whisper is drowned in a cacophony of mythmaking and impenetrable idiom. The early Okigbo poems are marked by a powerful lyricism and metronomic finesse, but they are an inward-looking, eclectic piece of obscurity; Clark graduated from the socially weightless, childish imitative poems of *A Reed in the Tide* to the fresh mellifluity of *Casualties*, a collection whose questionable political vision is reinforced by indiscreet explanatory notes evincing an embarrassing political hero-worship [...]. Echeruo's *Mortality* mainly celebrates his Catholic vision with a generous splash of Latin phrases, but maintains an intellectual silence over patently social and political matters. How could one have lived through the 'roaring sixties' [...] without boldly reflecting it in one's social consciousness and artistic output? (*The Writer as Righter*, 22–23)

12. One other writer of Osundare's generation who has quite forcefully pontificated on the instrumentalist values of literature, in a bid to clear out older writers from the space, is the playwright Femi Osofisan. See his essays collected under the title *Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State*.



13. Perhaps the most notably scathing response from Soyinka to the criticism from the Marxist school is 'Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies' included in his volume *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*.
14. In the essay 'The Modern Writer and Commitment', Kolawole Ogugbesan, obviously in response to Chinua Achebe's reduction of fiction to pedagogic goals, declares that '[it] is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writings at the service of a cause, even if it is such a laudable and uncontroversial cause as the 'education' of the people' (7). In the same essay, he quotes the South African critic Lewis Nkosi, who has a reputation for advising writers in his country to face craft instead of political issues, as saying, '[a] writer's special commitment is to language and its renewal and to the making of a better instrument for the delineation of human character – it is commitment to craftsmanship' (quoted in Ogugbesan, 17).
15. For an in-depth study of the poetry and poetics of the Alter-Native sub-tradition, see, among others, Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah's *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*; Charles Bodunde's *Oral Traditions and Aesthetic Transfer: Creativity and Social Vision in Contemporary Black Poetry*; Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality*; Oyeniyi Okuonye's 'Post-Civil War Nigerian Poetry: The Ibadan Experience' (267–275); Tanure Ojaide's *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*; J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada's 'Lore and Other in Niyi Osundare's Poetry' (73–86).
16. The political scientist Tunde Babawale describes the vicious circle of military regimes in Nigeria this way:

The military entrance into the Nigerian political scene dated as far back as January 15, 1966 when the country's first post-independence constitutional government was overthrown in a coup d'état. Ever since, the Nigerian military has refused to leave the centre-stage of politics [...]. Many had derisively described the Nigerian military as a 'political party' having become so entrenched in the country's politics that it decided and when to intervene in governance. (41)

17. Santrofi Anoma is the parabolic bird of the Akan people of Ghana. In popular Akan mythology, Santrofi Anoma is regarded as a dilemma bird. The poet Kofi Anyidoho explains this dilemma thus:

Endowed with mysterious treasures of the mind and voice, Santrofi is both a blessing and a curse. Santrofi is a blessing for the clarity of its vision and for the transforming beauty and power of its gift of song. But Santrofi is also a curse for its irritating and irrepressible urge to expose the unsavoury side of the society [...]. Society is blind without Santrofi's visionary guidance, but it stands forever condemned by Santrofi's persistent accusations of improper conduct. (5)

18. Prominent among those who suffered incarceration because, as they claim, they dared the dictators are the journalists Chris Anyanwu, Kunle Ajibade, George Mba; the poets/writers Ifowodo Ogaga, Akin Adesokan, Olu Oguibe; the human rights activists Bola Ige, Femi Falana, and Gani Fawehinmi, who, by 1996, had been detained by successive regimes 27 times (see Akpuda, 48).

19. For more on military rule in Nigeria, and especially on the dictatorships of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida and Sani Abacha, see Attahiru Jega's *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria*; Tunde Babawale's *Nigeria in the Crisis of Governance and Development: Retrospective and Perspective Analyses of Selected Issues and Events*; Kunle Ajibade's *What a Country* and *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Note*; Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*; Matthew Hassan Kukah's *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria*.
20. Needless to say, it is not only this crop of poets and writers that suffered censorship and all forms of oppression under the military regimes. In his essay 'Conditions in the Third World: A Playwright's Soliloquy on His Experiences', the eminent Nigerian dramatist Ola Rotimi points out that '[an] enduring state of anomie engenders malaise and disenchantment. This state is so unsettling in virtually every respect that it disorients and even frustrates the will to create or to produce' (126). For more on this, see the chapters 'Freedom and Creative Space', 'Squaring up to Africa's Future', and 'Singers of a New Dawn' in Niyi Osundare's *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature & Culture*. Also see the three chapters under 'Part Two: Commitment and its Problems' in Femi Osofisan's *Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State*.
21. The poet and scholar Niyi Osundare recognises this when he says, 'The [third generation of Nigerian writing] [...] can aptly be described as the poets' generation' (*Thread in the Loom*, 74).
22. Julia Kristeva, whose work builds elaborately on Bakhtin's ideas, sees carnivalesque as a social order capable of dismantling supremacist powers. 'Carnavalesque discourse,' she says, 'breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest' (65).
23. This is part of the headline of Tanure Ojaide's 2006 newspaper interview in which he declared that new Nigerian poets are copycats (*Daily Sun*, Sunday, 16 July, 2006). This conclusion turned out to be quite controversial when the new generation of poets and writers expressed their outrage over what they saw as nonchalant, easy going, remarks on new writing by those privileged to have come to the scene earlier.
24. Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Okinba Launko (a pen-name for Femi Osofisan), Harry Garuba, Funso Aiyejina, among others, taught English Studies in Nigerian universities in the decades between the 1980s and the 1990s. Some of them directly taught the poets that would emerge as the military era poets. One of the cases of teacher-student influence among Nigerian poets is the influence of Osundare on the poet Remi Raji (see Raji-Oyelade, 231–247; Egaya, 111–126).
25. This researcher is aware of the controversy surrounding the authorship of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. The book, like *Freudianism*, was initially published under the name of Valentin Voloshinov who was a member of the Bakhtin group in the 1920s. Clark and Holquist (147) argue that Bakhtin was the writer of the book, pointing out that the contribution of Voloshinov was mainly editorial. This researcher prefers to side with this argument, even though there are contentions that Bakhtin is at most a co-author.



26. See Maik Nwosu's preface to his poetry collection *Suns of Kush*; and his interview with this researcher in *In Their Voices and Visions*.
27. This is taken from the public lecture entitled 'New Nigerian Writing: Between Debauchery and the Kitchen' by Charles Nnolim at the 2005 annual Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors, Imo State Branch, held between 6 and 7 July 2005.
28. See Tony Afejuku's interview with Henry Akubuiro published in the *Daily Sun* of Sunday, 9 December 2007.
29. Nnolim expressed this view in an interview with Ezechi Onyerionwu published in *Vanguard Newspaper* of 13 April, 2008.

3

Poetics and Subjectivity: Making Poetry Serve Humanity

The protagonist in the drama of poetry and life is not nature, not divinity, not history or tradition, and not a culture. It is 'major man' wherever he or she is found.

— Harold Kaplan, *Poetry, Politics, and Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams*

One vital attribute of the poetic discourse category of the Alter-Native sub-tradition – one that it shares with, or bequeaths to, the discourse category of the military era – is its overwhelming accentuation of what one might call collective subjectivity, as against what was perceived as the individualistic subjectivity of the nationalist-modernists. This becomes a strategic locus of dissident discourse, especially in the way it is dialogised to pose the 'we' versus 'them' dialectic. The poet thus thinks of subjectivity often not in the form of *I*-narrative but in the form of *we*-narrative, a decidedly important part of the split subjectivity (voice, discourse, character) of nationhood. In other words, the question of nationhood is a split one: on one side are the military dictator and his cohorts; on the other side are the poet and the masses constituting the position of victimhood. The *we*-subjectivity, given its purported weaker position in the scheme of things (dictatorship uses state machineries against it), does present itself in diverse idioms as entity already made subject by, and subjected to, the political hegemony in the society. In the supposedly powerful dictatorships under which the poets operate, every subject seems to be already implicated in the expansive, widening sphere of subjugation. There is a compulsive interpellation of individuals by a powerful political system that denies people choices to construct their subjectivities. In her book *Feminism and Deconstruction*, Diane Elam explains how government deploys state apparatuses to confine the citizenry to a certain national subjecthood. 'The State as political entity,' she writes,



‘names the incarnation of a national people into a subject. Accordingly, political meta-narratives offer to work out the destiny of the subject’ (70). She goes on to point out that ‘the subject is necessarily always a political subject, produced by and within the *polis*. The subject does not enter into the realm of the political; rather, the subject is produced by the political itself as a way to regulate and control individuals’ (70).

The new Nigerian poets, in diverse metaphorical constructs, demonstrate the awareness that they are, along with the masses, enclosed, entangled in the subject position erected for them by the self-regarding, self-centred military regimes. Poetry becomes the point of action intended to shatter the strong walls of subjugation built around the weaker ones in the society. For poetry to perform this duty, the poets are evidently aware, it has to shift its focus from a poetics that glorifies and intellectualises tropes to one that charges tropes with the duty of effecting certain social action. As it turns out, the very act of contesting the state-formed subjectivity is in fact that of fashioning one’s own, in which case the poet attempts to seek another form of subjectivity or, in line with Gilles Deleuze’s concept of nomadic subjectivity, escapes into another domain of subjecthood (see Lorraine 125–6). Important is the poet’s claim that the fate of the ordinary people is tied to hers in the mobility to seek and acquire another subjectivity. This subjectivity is therefore nationalistic, embracing the supposedly voiceless in the society. With the poetry of Afam Akeh and Abubakar Othman, this chapter attempts to demonstrate in this chapter the conscious centralisation of subjectivity in poetics, and the dialectic thereof.

Afam Akeh: *This is Poetry as She Breathes*

Akeh’s poetry, especially those collected in *Stolen Moments*, and the newly published *Letter Home*, is characterised mainly by its prosaic nature, its tendency to be wordy, its rather conscious denial of elliptical intricacy, and its desire to embrace a variety of thematic issues.¹ His second volume appears programmatic, dramatising chiefly the phenomenon of exile, mainly as experienced by his contemporaries and himself. Indeed, as one may say of all the poets of this era, the wide-ranging thematic inquests of Akeh is to register the pervasive penetration of the political condition in Nigeria into all aspects of life. His poems of exile, like those of his contemporaries (Uche Nduka, Maik Nwosu), are obviously having the same condition of possibility as those produced in Nigeria; it is in the first place the political condition that drove him (and most of his contemporaries) into exile. This is, of course, to imply that the poem, such as any of Akeh’s poems, artistic and adventurous, finds itself often hamstrung by the social exigencies surrounding it. Here, then, one can argue as we have earlier done, that the poetry of the military era almost always considers itself

as *effecting* a moral action, besides artistic obligations, to not only narrativise a people and its nation, but to also *engage* the system of oppression that has cast a dour atmosphere on the circumstances of its creation from the front. To this extent, we can discern certain motifs that Akeh's poetry executes; these motifs aim to further establish the political bent of this poetry.

Akeh, perhaps more than his contemporaries, lays emphasis on the nature, the philosophy, the function, and the orchestration of a poem, from a metapoetic perspective. In the poems 'Words' and 'The Living Poem' Akeh theorises poetry in the manifesto-like manner Osundare does in his famous 'Poetry Is'. Indeed Akeh's 'The Living Poem' is better seen as an extension, in the sense of an explanatory note, to Osundare's. That is to say, the metaphors advanced by Osundare's poem, such as 'Poetry is / the hawker's ditty / the eloquence of the gong / the lyric of the marketplace [...] / what the sole tells the dusty path' (*Songs of the Marketplace*, 3–4), are deconstructed in Akeh's wordy, and explicitly practical poem. Or to better grasp this, one should consider Osundare's poem as a metaphor, and Akeh's poem as the tenor of that metaphor, in which case Akeh's poem offers an empirical dramatisation of Osundare's theoretic poem. Osundare sees a poem as a craft, an art, of the people, for the people, to be understood by the people; but Akeh sees the poem itself *as* the people, hence the poem is 'not merely art, but life' (26). A careful consideration of the stanza below will explain the point further:

This is poetry as she breathes,
 popping like corn, as she sits in a Lagos stall
 talking clever with the touts.
 Poetry, mortal, imperfect, nearly sober,
 palms together in supplication, belching:
 'Forgive us this day our daily dirt!'
 Poetry unbound, living free,
 in rhythm with the rocking streets,
 like frothing beverage, freshly brewed,
 surging with self-expression.
 All that life spreads in transit. (1–11)

If Osundare's 'Poetry Is' wrenches poetry from the high terrain of abstract, modernist craft, as it is judged by most critics to have done (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 73–86; N'Allah, xvii–xxxv), Akeh's 'The Living Poem' takes a step further by taking poetry to the concrete situation of life, through what we shall, for lack of a better phrase, call the idiom of anthropomorphism. This suggests that giving poetry, or a poem, the attributes of humans is a more practical way of installing poetry as



the people's art, as a fashioner of subjectivity. In other words, Osundare's 'Poetry Is' says it, and Akeh's 'The Living Poem' explains it in practical terms. But what is even more intertextually appealing between the two poems, and other poems such as Othman's 'Wordsworth Lied', is the overall assertion that for a people, a nation, condemned to bad governance, poverty, hardship, and depression, its poem, or its people's conceptualisation of the poetic craft, should necessarily and primarily take into account the plight of human beings. This is, as Akeh's poem here shows, *humanising* the poetic craft, which in the long run, whether a poem is a person or an idea, realises what we have called, following McGann, the performative dimension of the poetic discourse. A poem does have a 'dynamic condition', that is, 'an *actual* rather than a conceptual fulfilment, a completion in the continuous deed and event which is the poetic work' (McGann, 129).

Akeh's dramatisation aims to centralise the human condition in the sphere of poetic discourse. The emphasis on life, as against idea, is in a way positivistic; and poetry, in an optimistic manner, offers itself as a location for the construction of alternative subjectivity for the people. Akeh's poem, if we hear clearly, summons us to engage in the direct observation of the realities in, say, Lagos, the most popular and arguably populous, city in Nigeria. The implications are obvious. For a poet, or any kind of artist who comes from Lagos or Nigeria, the craft has to first recognise the existence of the human beings not in any form of idealist, intellectual, formation but in the practical; that is, the poet (like every African literary artist), as Ngugi points out, ought to identify 'actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing, struggling, organizing, [men and women and children] in history of which they are its products, its producers and its analysts' ('Writers in Politics', 477). What seems uttermost to the thematic climate of 'The Living Poem' is, beyond the centring of the human condition, the harnessing of poetry to offer the people a kind of relief, or succour, or even therapy, from their current crises of existence. It is in this sense that the poet invokes the beginnings of poetry, its oral beginnings, its folkloric reaches. A poem has been created from the beginning to help people, ordinary as well as special people, to move ahead in life: 'every life needs its poet / every tired love / lumbers up at the beckon of its poet' (42–44). Poetry becomes, in this sphere of poetics, the site of subjecthood that the poet and other people in the position of victimhood desire to inhabit.

The poet is therefore a man/woman who does not only have to see people through their moments of crisis, of 'tired love', but also through his/her personal travail. The poem 'Three African Lives', featuring the lives of the African politician, of the African military general, and of the poet, further reveals the image of the poet whose burden is at once personal and social in Africa.³ Really, it is more social in the sense that, for Akeh as he demonstrates in this poem, the poet is set to undergo

vicarious suffering in the form of self-given duties one of which is, to use Akeh's metaphor, 'slaying the silence' (58). The metaphor of silence, or the use of silence as a metaphor, is a site of intertextuality in the poetry of this generation; almost all the poets have invoked silence, textualised it, to bring attention to the era of intense militarisation in Nigeria. A kind of self-referentiality is obvious here: the signifier 'silence' is at once invoked to confront the phenomenon of silence, the absence of protest, of dispute, of ideological clash, or the presence of lethargy, paraplegia, complacency. Notice how silence is integral to the State's construction of subjectivity for its subjects. The poet invokes the signifier 'silence' in the precise sense of *fighting* the condition of silence, of inability, of helplessness. Beyond that, silence presents a sense of ambiguity: there is the silence that comes from the oppressor-figure who keeps mute in the face of the people's suffering; there is also the silence that comes from the oppressed who keep, often fearfully, quiet in the face of oppression. The latter sense has constituted a long standing theme in Nigerian writing with such powerful expositions of it as in Soyinka's *The Man Died*. The theme builds itself around the phenomenon of silence which became integral to the mechanism of oppression under the military rule in Nigeria.⁴

But the persona in Akeh's poem, unlike the persona in Raji's 'Silence I' and 'Silence II', and Soyinka's in *The Man Died*, does not see his people as cowardly, and as a result of which they are condemned to silence in the face of tyranny.⁵ He rather sees them as implicated, just as himself, in a wide context of brutality where the silence is in fact one of the fallouts of the entire society becoming 'dark'. Akeh uses the word 'dark' as a representation of the depths of despair, and the level of inhumanity the society has drifted to under the powerful regimes of the malevolent African politicians, and the soldiers, as the early part of the poem depicts. In such a dark place – we can even hear the echo of 'the dark continent' here – the poet becomes, in addition to being a craftsman, a humanitarian. His first and foremost duty is to attend to the plight of the people, and his poetry, as 'The Living Poem' prescribes, will not be about the sun or the moon or the stars, but about the people who have no control over their lives in the dark region, a people fated to grope in the circumscribing subjectivity mapped out by the political system. What is significant in Akeh's conception of the poet here is that the poet is placed on a higher, privileged terrain not materially but intellectually, and also in his courageous resolve to undertake a vicarious duty of puncturing the constricting subjecthood. Thus, he is able to 'give his raw heart' (52); he 'was blessed among night noises' (54); he 'had love like a virus, giving as lovers do' (59); and he 'was immortal that way' (62). But all of these, constituting the formation of alternative subjectivity, come with a price:



Always there were obstacles to that good life,
pages of poisoned history, couldn't find
a way to love without grieving.
So he dismembered his art in sacrifice,
howling with the pain, dislodging metaphors,
breaking with irony, letting the rot
speak freely and without colour.
Africa does that to her lovers.
Among the fatal mistresses is Africa.
Men have lost their head over her.
A poet can lose his way and become spent.
Africa made him a story. (69–80)

Every writer, artist, intellectual, activist, almost faces these travails. The persona, like Akeh himself, is imbued with a high sense of nationalism but the nation he loves does not love him; which is why the persona, having 'become spent' in Africa, would definitely, as is the vogue, take to self-exile, like Akeh and many of his contemporaries, that is, if he is not dead and forgotten as the ending suggests.

Now we turn to those responsible, according to Akeh, for making Africa such a continent that cannot listen to or tolerate its poets. Earlier in the poem, we have been given the lives of the typical African politician and that of the military general. The image of the politician Akeh presents to us is an enigmatic one. It does seem that here is the perfect politician, loved and adored by the people, generous in his ways, charismatic in his displays, even buried as he dies with pomp and pageantry. But the tone structuring this imagistic wonder is something of a satire. When Akeh writes that the politician 'sought ablution from the sins of the land / staging a final bow at the wash / leaving a toothbrush but no heir to his throne' (1–3), we immediately have a sense of a self-righteous, self-seeking politician only interested in gaining popularity and traversing the land. It is only such a politician that, after all the good things he is presumed to have done for the land, dies without anyone to take over from him. What this implies is that he, unlike the poet, really never has the interest of the land at heart. Each line of the poem here, if looked at closely, gives us images that speak of material acquisition. At his death, for instance, he is mourned with 'motorcades' (5), and 'lorry-loads of beef' (6). The politician is also a powerful person not in the sense the poet is powerful, not because he has an extraordinary way of giving up his life for his people, but in the way he wields powers:

O'dua the bounteous arm, father of a people,
 The beginning who was also an end.
 He bestrode the land like a stormy rain,
 spreading thunders, sowing by lightning.
 O'dua, symbol of a people's faith.
 The wind blew from East to West,
 They hailed the hand of O'dua.
 The wind direction changed, West to East
 They saw still the magic of O'dua. (8–16)

That the politician bestrides the land as a storm, thunder, and lightning – metaphors that draw our attention to a totalitarian system – is indicative of the great powers that are at his disposal. Such politicians, as we have had in real life in Nigeria, undertake populist actions that often turn out to be smokescreens for their self-seeking ends. The effects of this, sometimes, are paradoxical as Akeh's poems attempts to dramatise. The people, blinded by populism, even if serpentine and misplaced, fail to hold their leaders accountable, and rather fall into the temptation of apotheosising the politician (instead of the poet) who is after all only interested in serving himself. This is an example of what Ato Quayson calls 'the cult of the leader as culture hero' in Africa (*Postcolonialism*, 15). Quayson notes that this cult, especially during the early days of nationalism in Africa, 'entailed a series of tragic distortions in social arrangements, with an entire cohort of sycophants growing around the nationalist leader to prop up his self-image and to project him (they were invariably men) as the representative of the nation' (15).

What emerges from Akeh's characterisation of the African politician here are, first, the authoritarian regime of the politician, the politician's imposition of himself on the psyche of the nation; and, second, the blatant gullibility of the people in literally worshiping the politician without any sense of critical judgement. The society of this politician does not, as we can see, have a space for poets, intellectuals, activists, and the like. The sense of discontinuity evoked in the poem, where the politician has no heir and 'his shoes were forbidden other feet' (21), implies that such a society, fixated as it is on moribund materialism, will lack a future. If by using the Yoruba word '*O'dua*' Akeh implicitly uses late Chief Obafemi Awolowo's populism as, perhaps, an allegory, then this segment of the poem is, beyond its references to the wider spheres of Africa, a powerful critique of the Nigerian situation today in which a terrible gap is perceived between the founding political leaders of Nigeria (Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo), and the politicians that come after them.⁶ But this is to



partially read this poem; for what is also discernible in Akeh's specification is that the politician is implicated, as it were, in the crisis his society faces after he dies, after they give him such a gorgeous burial, and there is no one to rule the land. The satire, the indictment, therefore extends from the people, hemmed in by populism or mere display of material wealth, to the politician who in his life probably thinks only of how to control the people and shower riches on himself even in his death.

The military general is worse. The poet introduces him as someone who 'wore violence like a pair of boots' (22). The boots of the soldiers, during the military regimes in Nigeria, were of course symbols of violence: most immediate acts of brutality came from the kicking boot or from the butt of the gun used to hit people. The soldier is essentially associated with a variety of violent acts:

He censored laughter, his nod was death.
 He cancelled meaning and exiled dreams.
 He was the beginning of terrible tears.
 So that the sun set when he spoke
 and darkened skies threatened.
 He fed the earth with corpses
 and the soil would not crop. (25 –31)

The lines above bluntly debunk whatever is left of the so-called military messianism in Africa, most especially in Nigeria where sometimes the unsuspecting elite approved of military coups because of the messianic slogans with which they came.⁷ Notice that the chosen words, the realised images, are quite clear, almost divested of figural essences, possibly to make them assert the immediacy and the urgency of this characterisation. Unlike the satiric tone we notice in the characterisation of the politician, the tone here is that of open condemnation. Typical as it is of the military era poets' characterisation of oppressive soldiers, the passage above, juxtaposed with the characterisation of the poet and of the politician, highlights in a penetrating way the nightmarish cruelties the ordinary people lived with during what the poet and his contemporaries consider the military invasion of governance in Nigeria. Most of the words chosen point directly to the condition of suffering under soldiers. The obvious harsh stance of the poet here is to contest the subject position the military has already created for the poet. Here, too, Akeh writes of the end of the soldier, just like the politician's. The soldier with his iron rule, which, according to the poet, 'lasted long' (38), has to die. The death comes suddenly, and 'like winds that shuffle past' (51). The emphasis on the sudden coming of death, on its unexpectedness, its uncomplicated occurrence, is aimed to remind us of the death of the terrible Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha whose death most of the poets of this era have versified.⁸

‘Three African Lives’ is a poem that attempts to capture the political, social and cultural life of Africa from the waves of independence in the 1960s to the late 1990s, a period of short-lived triumphs, of the incursion of oppressive military regimes, and of socio-political anguish for the African nation-states. Like most poems written during or about this period, this poem indicts the political leadership of Africa for those conditions. By putting the poet’s life morally above those of the politician and the soldier, Akeh shifts the poet’s position of subjectivity from what the rulers have fashioned for him to what Akeh, as a poet, deems fit to fashion for all poets. The sense of solidarity between the poet in the poem and Akeh as a poet is strategic to discourse formation among the poets of the military era. Two poems by Akeh particularly foreground the confraternity among these poets bound by a historical fate. The poem ‘Harry’s Den’ indexes the beginning of this generation of poets; and the poem ‘National Broadcast’ signposts that intensity of an era that virtually came to militarise every aspect of life in Nigeria.

‘Harry’s Den’, pithy as it is, dramatises the beginning of this generation of poets, depicting the role the poet and scholar Harry Garuba played in the emergence of these new poets in the 1980s:

In the dark, tropical nights
 poetry staggered to Harry’s den,
 enlightened by beverages,
 burning with words
 and the promise of imagined worlds.
 Words were the drugs
 on which our lives expanded.
 Everything said something
 about all things and nothing.
 And often the words
 spread their wings, chanting:
 ‘We can fly, we can fly.’
 But the nights said: ‘It’s dark.’
 So their wings may be spared
 the wildest of their dreams
 such flights as eagles have
 is rested by the dark.



The images, as characteristic of Akeh's poems, are limpid but penetrative, some of them are images we have encountered in the previous poems. Darkness, as that unwanted invasion of the society by the military, recurs here, and as a more practical site of personal and social paralysis. Poetry, both as a central image and as a topos in Akeh's versification, exhibits its anthropomorphic incarnation here, coming compellingly as a collectivised performance towards unseating an inhuman power. With darkness as that paralysing state, and poetry as that counter-hegemonic deflector, the tenor of the metaphor 'Harry's den' comes to full view: it is the location of the ideological discourse (nothing other than the culmination of this poem and others) that sets for itself the role of 'slaying the silence' that the darkness has imposed on the land. But behind this poem, and other poems, whose *discoursal* effects totalise into a social action, are human beings, themselves, as this poem clearly shows, implicated in the darkness on the land. This of course buttresses our earlier standpoint that behind each poem is an author, a producer, who sets the *event* of language into action – herein lies the sense of humanism propelling ideological struggle in military era poetry. For we recognise here that, in spite of the foremost position of the text, or discourse, we cannot dismiss the influences, the exertions of the women and men who are, as it were, hidden behind the texts, who produce these poems as 'the textualization of their lives' (McGann, 16). Akeh's focus, therefore, is both on the poetry of this generation as a text, a discourse of dissidence, and on those behind the discourse, a collectivity of consciousness that realises itself in the tempo-spatial organ metaphorised as a 'den'. Historically, Dr Garuba's apartment at the staff quarters of the University of Ibadan was noted for hosting writers, especially the upcoming ones.⁹ That Akeh enacts in this poem the very condition of nascence, influence, and seminality is obvious with the exuberance that attends to this beginning: the words, that is to say the poets, 'spread their wings, chanting: / 'We can fly, we can fly'. But they are cautioned, even though it is clear they do know the dangers of flying in a society blanketed with darkness of oppression. They know too that in this darkness the enthusiasm of the youths, the dreams of the dreamers, meet their ends, as the last two lines of the poem suggest.

The poem 'National Broadcast', even more than 'Three African Lives', fully orchestrates what the poet has all the while been referring to as night, as darkness. The persona, a military captain who has just taken over power through a coup, instantly promoting himself to the rank of a general, relates to us the process, the mechanism, harrowing as it is, of turning a society in its bright daylight into a land of night and darkness. It is a poetisation of the usual speeches of triumph from military men that follow the marshal songs, those speeches that people, including the poet, heard so frequently in the past decades in Nigeria. This poem and 'Harry's Den' mark the beginning of the epoch of poetical discourse that inscribes itself in the historical development of Nigeria, culturally, politically; but within this general

poetical discourse are varied voices, heterogeneous tones and tenors, underscoring the many toilers in this era of writing oppression.

Besides the recurrent images of darkness, there is a conscious engagement of clouds as a motif for the bitter condition the nation is condemned to; this is replete in the title poem of his collection *Stolen Moments*. This poem poses, rather pretentiously, as an individualistic verse. The supremacist assertion of the 'I', and the persona's consistent narrativisation of himself (clues abound in the poem that the persona is male), mostly focusing on his good and bad moments throughout the lengthy poem indicate that the poet prefers, like some of his contemporaries, to proceed to the public from the personal. This is in fact a strategy of subject formation that offers the poet the advantage to focus his personal experience. But it is remarkable that the two-lined stanza that opens the poem seems to contest our claim of the poem to be persona-centred: 'I hear all the caged birds / lament the loneliness of their prisons' (1–2). We take 'caged birds' here as a strong metaphor which refers to the numerous people either clamped down by a regime that attacks any of its detractors, or caged by a hostile socio-political climate, a way of *detaining* them in that subject position. Our conjecture seems to be supported by the lines that immediately follow: that is to say, the caged birds are 'surrounded by metal / and busy eyes too full of their lusts' (3–4). The metaphor 'metal' easily unveils two things: a prison situation or/and the character of the military. Of course, that also applies to 'lusts' which can either be deconstructed as the soldier's inordinate desire for women and/or power. The use of the word 'rocks' on line six of the poem further enhances our interpretation: 'there is a world that breathes in great rocks'. Even if the word 'rocks' does not refer to the seat of government in Nigeria today called 'Aso Rocks', it does metaphorically convey that sense of fortification that the military oppressor and his cohorts built around themselves during their dictatorships in Nigeria.



We see everything in this poem through the aerial eyes of the persona. He declares:

I am standing at the summit of a world –
a vast ocean of green silence
rolling in giant waves of rock and coal.

All the marks of the ages, scars of deed cracks
on the slopes, open as the content of page of a book.

I am stunned here with a mirror of life,

and stand on trembling feet
that bear false witness of their prodigal past.

A rush of empathy flows with the blood, but
there is a formidable store of memories

that will yield no permanent space
to this green life I see. (9–20)

Examined closely, the lines convey the broken psyche of a nation playing itself out in front of the persona. First, the colour green has to be seen as that symbolic colour of Nigeria's national flag – beyond asserting Nigeria's nationhood in terms of independence, it also symbolises the agricultural wealth of the country, especially as the persona sees the nation as 'green life'. Beyond the psychic collapse of a nation, we also see in the poetic passage above the geographical 'cracks', to use the poet's metaphor, which befalls the nation; 'scars of deeds', for instance, recalls the hasty birth of the Nigerian nation by the colonial masters, a situation that was only convenient for their exploitations.¹⁰ The strength of this poem, then, lies in its concentration on the geography and natural resources of Nigeria to recall the injuries inflicted on her as a country, on her people as an ethnically diverse people.

Soon we encounter the motif of clouds so elaborately expressed in this poem: 'Noon: the threat of rain hangs solid' (25). This rain that comes in the noon, in a time unwanted (this is resounding in the tone of the poem), is reminiscent of the crises, mostly political, that befall a people unexpectedly, not because they are not ready for the crises, but because of the sheer stupidity of such occurrences. Nigeria,

for this poet, is a land where the unwanted rain came too early – this is echoing the Achebean provocation, based on an Igbo proverb, that artists and writers should be among those to recognise for the people the day rain started to beat them.¹¹ This persona's recognition of rain at noon suggests that he knows when the rain starts beating his land. Before the coming of the rain, and by all means the cause of the rain, there are 'bargains [that] keep tumbling' (27) where the persona stands; the import of this, we may surmise, is the quarrel, the disputation, the disagreement that leads to the major crises, if, as we have suggested, clouds are taken as metaphorical references to the crises of disintegration and leadership in Nigeria. The persona goes on to tell us that the period, just before the coming of the rain, when clouds hang ominously above the people, 'belongs to money' (29), a metonym that can open up issues ranging from the avarice of the protagonists of the crises, to the character of Nigeria as an oil-rich nation where so much perceived wealth leads, rather unfortunately, to materialistic chaos. There is thus what the poet calls a 'sense of urgency' (30), which is even better understood with this engaging image: 'a cock is urgent in his demands on his hen' (32) – insofar as we take the cock as those eager to reap the wealth of and to conquer the nation; and take as the hen, the country with its diverse fertility, a helpless entity. What the poet reveals next is vital:

Noon, the perfect riot,
when all is free for those with muscles

and a loser drifts by unnoticed
like the gentle noon breeze.

And I am the loser here among the stalls
where money makes the man,

my pockets loaded with their own emptiness. (33–39)

This looks like the survival of the fittest. But the social dichotomy between the privileged and the unprivileged is set out clearly here. Projecting his voice as that of the unprivileged, and of the masses, the persona talks of his empty pocket, the empty pockets of the many, in the scheme of things. For those with 'muscles' in any society are usually the few privileged ones – the image of the marketplace where 'money makes the man' establishes the material wealth of the few who impose themselves as the real movers of events in the society.



And that is why ‘Clouds, grouped and gloomy’ (40) persist in the land. The clouds are first like ‘dreams’ (43), then they appear ‘grey as death’ (47). Furthermore, the persona says they are ‘great clouds that hang like rocks on thin thread’ (52). These images, and others in the poem, vividly depict the tension between life, living, the desire of a people to live in peace, and the eruption of crises aimed at destabilising the human society. What the persona presents to us is the imminent collapse of a system, of a nation, of a people; a collapse that, as we have seen so far, is caused by the privileged ones in the society who, according to the persona, ‘roll over my shrunken, tremulous world / like implacable avengers’ (54–55). The remaining poem presents the persona’s disenchantment and disillusionment over the taking of his land by rock-like men. Although not explicitly stated, we can discern that the persona is an artist, a poet, an intellectual, a teacher, an avatar of the Man in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. For he is a man ‘too sobered by books’ (72); a man who, because of the turbulence in the physical and the metaphysical regions of his society, ‘cannot write the poem of [his] dreams’ (111).

So, the poems he writes, in what we have seen of Akeh’s poetry, are *agencies* of action. Their action begins, as we have tried to show, from their self-definition whereby they conceive of themselves in the realm of anthropomorphism (poems that breathe like ordinary people). In this act of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity, they relativise and further contextualise the conception of poetry as the people’s art, a thesis that has been developed and practised by the Alter-Native poets. These poems do not only *theorise* themselves but they also inaugurate the action of constructing a different subjectivity from the one generally, compulsorily, constructed by the existing political system for the poet and other ordinary people in Nigeria during the military regime. Abubakar Othman is another poet, like Akeh, who is keen about a *pragmatic* poetics that can better reconstruct subjectivity, and it is to his poetry we now turn.

Abubakar Othman: ‘Wordsworth Lied’

Othman’s volume of poetry *The Palm of Time* contains poems that stand as metaphorical expositions of a definite historicism. We may then first deconstruct the polyvalent ‘palm’ of the title, as a historical template that traps the events of these poems, and stamps the significance of each of these poems as an *event*.¹³ Satirical and subtle in their drives, with occasional force of thesis as in the poem ‘Wordsworth Lied’, Othman’s poems are eager to thematise the dialectic of ‘we’ versus ‘them’ in images and tones that reveal the passion of art as fashioner of subject position. Othman’s images are unpretentious, the tones unmistakable. Although his poems are not as wordy as Akeh’s, they share with Akeh’s poems the non-elliptical texture of giving the poems a feature that situates them at the

conjunction of poetry-as-metaphor and poetry-as-metonymy. The notion of poetry-as-metonymy invests a certain powerful referential schema in what is primarily considered a metaphorical domain as a result of which poetry as *undisguised* discourse acquires greater pragmatic potency. David Lodge, in his book *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphors, Metonymy, and the Trypology of Modern Literature*, insightfully juxtaposes metonymy and metaphor as two modes of writing and reading that may often not be easy to distinguish, especially as ancient rhetoricians and critics in the past regarded metonymy (and synecdoche) as part of metaphor. Lodge elaborates on the dichotomy mapped out by Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle in *The Fundamentals of Language*. That is, the positioning of metaphor on the paradigmatic level of language and of metonymy on the syntagmatic level. While metaphor belongs to the ‘selection axis’ metonymy belongs to the ‘combination axis’. But as Lodge explains so well, there is always the conscious move, since modernism, to restrict poetry to the metaphorical domain. However, ‘[a] different kind of deviance results when the poet, especially the lyric poet, pushes his medium in the opposite direction [i.e. the direction of metonymy] – when he makes the metaphorical development of his topic subject to the kind of metonymic constraints that the realistic prose writer normally applies’ (Lodge, 118). Lodge goes on to explain that poetry, such as of the Romantic age, that does not alienate itself too far from the language of prose, that deploys language in a prosaic form, can be distinguished as leaning to the syntagmatic level more than a poetry, such as of the modernist age, rooted in symbolism, imagism, and mythopoeia. To adopt this rather useful dichotomy to the Nigerian literary scene is to view poetry in English in Nigeria since the Alter-Native era as tending towards the metonymic axis. The military era poets in their poetics and practice, as we have seen with the example of Akeh’s poetry, gravitate toward a realism that seems to mortgage metaphor with the intention to ascribe to their poems greater semantic force, and greater appeal to the course of poetry as a discourse (poem as an act). This practice, Wordsworthian in a way, had been earlier announced in Osundare’s poetry. The metonymic pole is therefore one that Nigerian poetry since the Alter-Native era, shares with Wordsworth’s Romantic age.¹⁴

But Othman, in spite of this similarity between the poetry of his age and that of Wordsworth’s, contests a vital aspect of the creative process famously developed by Wordsworth in the Preface. Wordsworth pins the creative imagination to what he calls an overflow of emotion recollected in tranquillity. It is precisely with this point that Othman quarrels in ‘Wordsworth Lied’, a short, bitter poem explicating what may now be seen as the long-held creed of African poetics. Othman’s meta-poetic reflection on the creative process is predicated on the praxis of living in a society traumatised by socio-political instability. It bears a threnody that essentialises the writers’ plights especially in their attempts to reconcile their artistry to the sense of social commitment that confronts them in the literary tradition in which they find



themselves. Subjecthood here is still the construction of the all-powerful regime; and it would be clear, in fact, that Othman, like Akeh, negotiates poetics as a means of structuring alternative subjectivity. Othman, in the light of the creative space and temperament available to him as an artist, begins with an outright rejection of William Wordsworth's famous view of poetry. The two-word expression 'Wordsworth lied' is rather more potent if seen as a metonym, or synecdoche, associated with, or standing for, what poets like Othman consider a Western, *alien* conception of poetic imagination, a conception rooted in the nature fantasies associated with Romanticism.¹⁵ In what follows, the poet Othman enunciates the process of creativity, of crafting poetry that he and his contemporaries experience, which contrasts with Wordsworth's romantic situation. For Wordsworth, the poet must be at peace before he can collect the emotion and process it into poetry, which implies that Wordsworth and the poets of his order must have had enough peace for creating poetry. The concept of peace which Wordsworth makes central to his notion is one that has been challenged since modernism, most vigorously in T.S. Eliot's seminal essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. While Eliot in his rebuttal draws attention to the turmoil that takes place in the creative zone of the writer's intellection, Othman in this poem purely bases his negation on socio-political realities that exert inevitable control on the process of poetic imagination. In other words, Othman historicises both the craft and the process of creating the craft. The poetic craft is relativised in the sense that since socio-political realities differ from society to society, even from individual to individual, issues of aesthetics and thematics ought to be unavoidably placed within a historicity.

The concept of having peace as a context for writing poetry is idealism, even utopianism for some African poets, because

When words drop from your pen
Like arrows from the quiver
Does it matter how they fall on paper
It is the pain they paint
That creates the emotion for poetry. (4–8)

In Othman's likening the poet's words to 'arrows' we discern the functionality of the poet's craft, and the organic link between their art and their society; it is with the 'arrows' that the poet punctures the subject position imposed by the regime, and creates an alternative subjectivity. The belligerent aspect of the poet is hinged on an artistic perception shaped by the actuality of belonging to a society whose dystopian and nightmarish conditions affect the poet. The imagery of the arrow and the quiver places the poet on a background where the gap between art and activism is bridged,

giving way to an outrage carefully thought as a domain of artistic fulfilment. Social, political and economic phenomena, then, become foregrounded in art, negotiating the humanist space of the African writers and artists. This is mainly part of the writer's belief that art is instrumental. In her book, *African Literature as Political Philosophy*, M.S.C. Okolo explains this when she writes, '[the] imaginative writer, through his or her work, can offer critical appraisal of the existing political situation and in this way mould or redirect society's actions, beliefs, ideals, values and ideas. Ideas contained in literature can influence people's perception about politics and the best means of effecting political change' (27).

It is in this light that Othman's poetry, like those of the poets within his tradition, does not glorify constellations or trees or birds, as is common in the philosophy of Wordsworth's Romantic age and poetry; rather his words and imagery paint 'pain' because that is what he sees and feels around him, in his society and in his age. Beyond painting pain, the words *attack* the existing hegemonic political discourse. Showing the utter disparity between Wordsworth's society and his, Othman points out that 'No recollection reduces pain / No tranquillity tranquilizes pain' (11–12). It is because Wordsworth lives in a land of peace that he talks about tranquillity; and it is because Othman lives in the land of pain that his words and his entire process of creativeness knows turbulence, but not tranquillity. Othman's final, disquieting declaration is that

Poetry is a recurrent emotion
That shatters tranquillity
Like the bewildering death
Of an innocent child. (13–16)

And in this summation lies the pessimistic thrust in Othman's threnodic tone: the shattering of peace results from a built-up tension in the poet because of the pain within and with which they live. A disturbing paradox here is that a process of creation becomes that of destruction. There is no hope that things will change, that the tranquillity shattered will be regained, and that the poet will one day come to agree with Wordsworth. The image of the death of innocence here intensifies the dour condition of pain that will continue to make the poet acquire the emotion that shatters the peace of the despot. Othman's other poems embark on this duty of shattering tranquillity, the type that the military despot attempts to build around himself by muffling all opposition voices, including that of the writer, in the society.

The poem 'Music at Dawn', like Akeh's 'National Broadcast', offers reasons for the turbulence that denies the poet the equanimity needed for a painless art. The music at dawn is not that of pleasure, but it is music that 'Drags on [...] / Its wailing trumpet / [and] Blows bullets into my heart' (18–20). It is the martial music that was



in the 1980s and the 1990s used to usher in successful coup plotters into the seats of power in Africa. Dawn, here, is both used at the literal and at the metaphorical levels. It was mostly at the hours of dawn that the martial music was played in Nigeria because coups were usually hatched in the night.¹⁶ This is echoed in Maik Nwosu's novel *Alpha Song* which idiomatises night with particular attention to the polyvalent essences of the night in a society riddled with all forms of social infamies hinged on survival instincts.¹⁷ Metaphorically, dawn, in its clichéd sense, suggests a new beginning especially when the status quo becomes overbearing. The music at dawn is therefore the music of a new era, announcing the emergence of a new dictatorship. The persona is at once judgemental about the new team whose music wakes one up at dawn just when one begins to sleep because of being kept awake by 'the terror of night marshals' (7), referring to not just the armed robbers routinely terrorising the citizenry, but also to the coup plotters whose activities, in the view of the poet, amounts to robbing the entire nation. The poet asks a vital question:

Who are these new patriots
Whose music out-lives the National Anthem,
Who are these new plunderers
Blowing trumpets of bullets
Into the quiet alcoves of dawn? (21–25)

Here is another of Othman's many rhetorical questions that seek to fully undress the actors of chaos making nonsense of nationalism in Nigeria. In most African states, the martial songs are recurrent decimals, as Ogaga Ifowodo demonstrates in his 'When I Hear Martial Songs', causing disjunctions and discontinuity in the developmental designs of the nation. Beyond that, a sense of cyclical oppression is instilled in the people in what in the parlance of the Nigerian military is known as 'soldier go, soldier come'. When music is heard at dawn again, another soldier has come with his team of destroyers, subjecting the nation to further suffering. The music will continue surely to be heard in this land that, unlike Wordsworth's land, is filled with pain; a land in which, as Toyin Adewale says in one of her poems, people learn to 'love with pain' ('Safari', *Die Aromaforscherin*). In 'Here We Are', Othman takes us deeper into the state of anomie resulting from the occupation of the seats of power by the soldiers. The poet attempts to unravel the systematic ruse beneath the hallelujah of messianism that often greets a new military regime. Thanks to the gullibility of the citizenry, each succeeding dictator is welcomed and praised as the leader that will lift the nation from the socio-economic and political quagmire in which the nation finds itself. Before the dictator and his team of 'ghoulish Generals' (7) leave the scene, the nation is plunged into a deeper crisis

of national survival. This is not hard to fathom even if it comes through as mystery. The poet's careful selection of words, building up sharp imagery, reveals the huge aggrandisement at the centre of the soldiers' project. In this premise of wealth acquisition and power play, the generals, the poet tells us, 'Sit at the butchery table / Relishing our flesh' (8–9). Here then is the cannibalistic tendency of the leaders variously versified by poets from the Okigbo age to the Othman age in Nigerian poetry. In their search for befitting metaphors that can best describe the utterly dehumanising nature of Nigerian dictators, poets have had to resort to animal and bestial imagery, specifically the destructive habit of cannibalism. African dictators, then, because of their sadistic brutalisation of the masses, are seen as animals, often greater animals out to devour lesser animals. Christopher Okigbo in his 'Path of Thunder' is perhaps the first to discern this inherent tendency when he writes:

the elephant ravages the jungle
 the jungle is peopled by snakes
 the snake says to the squirrel
 I will swallow you
 the mongoose says to the snake
 I will mangle you
 the elephant says to the mongoose
 I will strangle you. ('Elegy for Slit-drum', 43–50)

The game here is that of survival with one animal wiping the other animals out of space insofar as it has the power to do that, and then inhabit and acquire all that is in the world alone. Other poets in Nigeria such as Osundare, Ofeimun and Ojaide have used animals as symbols conspicuously in their poetry. 'Often Osundare's metaphor for the poor,' J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada writes, 'is sheep, while wolf is his idea of the rich who savour the helpless in order to survive doubly' (76). Ojaide sees the enemies of the masses as animals. He titles one of his poetry collections *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems*, invoking the double sense of vulture as a bird of prey and as a predator to describe the oppressor. In *Labyrinths of the Delta*, Ojaide says, 'I breathe fire from my heart, not to burn any house but to drive *vermin* from our midst. I have the heart to scare the *owl* from sorcery and outsmart the *tortoise* in its cheating game' (emphasis added, 5). He draws attention to the harmful nature of these animals. Ojaide points out in one of his critical works that '[in] modern African poetry [...] fauna and flora become sources of symbols, images, figures of speech, and fables' (*Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, 28). In this tradition, new poets in Nigeria freely source images from the fauna to construct the oppressor-figure. Othman gives this practice another dimension when he portrays the generals in a meal of the masses' flesh. This gives a fuller sense of cannibalism, dramatised



even more explicitly in Musa Okpanachi's collection of poetry entitled *The Eaters of the Living*.

In this land of cannibalistic rulers, the poet laments that they are 'Casualties of civilian misadventure' (2), which obviously gives way to the military take over. They are also impoverished, 'Wallowing about in aimless land' (13) and subjected to all sorts of dehumanising policies imposed by the military. It is this strategy the despot uses to create the masses' subject position, a totalising act of reducing all to beggaredom in order to weaken any possible psyche, collective or individual, of raising an alternative discourse. But the poet is determined, with an insistent discourse that negates the military's claim of having what it takes to build a nation. In the poet's view, the military are simply on the scene to further destroy the land. This informs the conclusion that:

When this new nation is built
When this utopia becomes real
It shall be peopled by ants and rodents
For our present hardship cannot sustain us to that day. (21–23)

Part of the realist essence of the new Nigerian poetry is the apocalyptic eventuality woven into the poet's social vision to serve mainly as force in a resistant, subversive discourse. The design is to, through metaphors and symbols, demystify the fearsome self-constructed subjectivity of the military in Nigeria. If the despot and his cohorts are staged as cannibals, as this poem does, and the ordinary people are reduced to the status of 'ants and rodents', then this poem is decidedly justified in instituting itself in the larger frame of producing a narrative insisting on unseating military despotism.

In a rather humorous poem, 'The Last Bazaar', Othman concentrates on the phenomenon of poverty in the midst of plenty common to the nations of Africa. The poem, with a generous dose of satire, centres on the dictatorships of Babangida and Abacha.¹⁸ The opening line of the poem alludes to that period: 'The scourgeful season of SAP [Structural Adjustment Programme]' (1).¹⁹ Othman deploys pun, sarcasm and irony to dramatise the contradictions of a wealthy nation caught in the webs of rapacious generals. The Armed Forces Ruling Council, the highest decision-making body of the Nigerian military regime becomes, in the poet's designation, 'armed Forces Reaping Council' (4), made up of army officers gloating over how much they can acquire from the abounding riches of the nation. Indeed, as the poet says, their attitude towards wealth acquisition is that of warlords making themselves rich through 'the booties of war' (5). The import here is that the generals-turned-looters have a strong sense of plunder and abandonment as though the land is not theirs, and is not their posterity's. After accumulating as

much as they can, they waste the nation in the sense that warriors render desolate a land they have conquered. Othman's 'The Last Bazaar' depicts how systematically the soldiers go about the destruction of the land as they put between the land and themselves that monumental greed resulting in an organic disconnection and ethical severance. Every organ of the regime is thus a means of erecting a wall between the soldiers and the civilian, with the former exerting uncontrolled powers on the latter. The poem reminds us of the pet projects of the generals' wives through which they assist their husbands to sap the land of its wealth: during the Babangida regime, it was 'Better Life Programme for Rural Women', punned as '*Better Life Pockets*' (19); and during the Abacha regime, it was 'Family Economic Advancement'.²⁰ It is also the poem's contention that People's Bank, an initiative of the Babangida junta to reach the masses with loans and other financial facilities, turned out to be fraud with which the military government swindled the nation. This poem does not spare the white elephant project of the Babangida regime to democratise Nigeria through the formation of an America-styled, two-party system.²¹ In a way, the civilians/politicians, who were themselves dishonest and rapacious in the tradition of military corruption, helped to grind the nation in the political chaos of the 1990s. It is these politicians in the garments of military corruption that the poem satirises here:

And now the *Repugnants*
 And the *Decadents*
 Bid for the remaining chaff of the nation
 May the children go begging
 Instead of queuing behind bidders
 Who have just enough for themselves to bid. (23–28)

'*Repugnants*' and '*Decadents*' are puns on the Republicans and Democrats that the political parties, National Republican Convention and Social Democratic Party, were supposed to produce in 1990s Nigeria. Earlier, the poem has described the state of the masses in this era of bazaar in which the military, the '*Repugnants*' and the '*Decadents*' plunder the nation.

Othman's satiric punches on the military are harder in 'Peace-Time Generals', a three-stanza poem that reveals the utter fakery that is the Nigerian army. Like Idris Amali in his poetry collection, *Generals without War*, Othman questions the validity and functionality of an army that is more interested in the seats of power than in the security of the nation. Othman lays bare before us the utterly effeminate soldiers and concludes that these cannot be true generals since, unlike the true generals – and he alludes to Macbeth, Amandla and Shaka the Zulu, his nation's generals are made



In mock gimmicks of war,
 They play hide-and-seek in orchards of fruits and flowers
 And try their idle guns on sandbags
 An annual exercise of idle officers
 To harvest new Generals. (4–8)

It is no wonder that such generals are given to one lust: to seize the seats of government by all means, often violently. These, in the estimation of this poem, are not generals that can defend the territorial integrity of the nation in a situation of war. They are generals that brag of their greed to amass wealth by hook and crook, to impoverish a nation without a thought about its future. Such are the generals peopling the nations of Africa, bringing about the proliferations of guerrilla armies. The real Generals, according to this poem, are those made in the process likened to the making of great trees: ‘The baobab grows huge because / It has proven its might against the reconnaissance storm’ (9–10). The poem goes further to say that ‘Great trees grow in the forest not in the garden’ (16). If the generals are great trees, like the imposing baobab, then they cannot be grown in the ‘garden’ of power and corruption as is the case in Africa.

The Nigeria of the military era, therefore, degenerated into a climate of oppression, fear and rot. In a poem simply titled ‘Kaduna’, Othman presents the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna as a symbol of the total rot that characterised all aspects of the Nigerian state. In a holistic sweep, the poem spares no sphere of the Nigerian system and, as usual, looks upon the masses as the eventual victims of the mess created by the military, the politicians and even the technocrats complicit in killing the nation.²² The decline of Kaduna as the seat of northern political power, this poem contends, came with the militarisation of Nigeria and the consequent decline in socio-political, cultural and ethical values. The poem draws our attention to Kaduna as ‘A mortuary of political casualties / And forlorn heroes of military coups’ (2–3). The poet insists that Kaduna is both a geographical and political mortuary littered with some corpses which are:

Geront
 ocractic Generals
 Ex-Executhieves and legislooters
 Faithless Imams and sinful priests
 Floating like floes

In the sea streets of Kaduna. (11–15)

Othman’s characteristic puns in ‘Ex-Executhieves’ (for ex-executives) and ‘legislooters’ (for legislators) reveal the real nature of the politicians who gave the military the opportunity to take over power and unleash oppression in the 1980s

and the 1990s. Today, most of these failed politicians, retired military generals and religious leaders own houses in Kaduna, giving it an air of a metropolis housing corrupt individuals who should have faced the wrath of the law. They live with their corruption in Kaduna and the poem chooses to see them as ‘tombless corpses.’

In a wider spectrum, the poem’s Kaduna becomes a Nigeria with all the three major ethnic groups, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, struggling to grab her wealth. The umbrella bodies of these ethnic groups, pursuing tribalist aggrandisement in Nigeria are, The Arewa Peoples’ Congress for Hausa, the Ohaeneze Ndigbo for Igbo and the Oodua People Congress for Yoruba. Using a pun again as a poetic handle to reach the rot and emptiness beneath the mask of socio-political organs, Othman refers to these groups as ‘The Indi Igbo vampires of Okigwe / The Oodua people cannibals / [and] The Arewa confused feudalists’ (24–26). The interest of this poem here is to unveil the destructive tendencies of these groups that have shaped political events in Nigeria along the line of tribalism and feudalism. Also serving as pressure groups, each time any of these groups speaks out for or against a policy, it does so from the angle of selfish interest. In the real sense, the poem indicts these very elitist groups for perpetrating socio-political chaos in Nigeria, resulting in the often pessimistic interventions of the military. In the space of subjectivity, these groups occupy a subject position, like the military’s, that is self-built. It is unlike the ordinary people’s subject position which, as the poems have claimed so far, mirrors the heavy-handedness of the military in ruling Nigeria.

Some of Othman’s poems provoke the people into creating an alternative subject position for themselves in the space of subjectivity. ‘Waiting’ is one such poem. The persona speaks to the people considered as fellow sufferers that the waiting for a messiah is endless unless they learn to take action against oppression. The thesis of ‘Waiting’ is synonymous with that of ‘Signs of the Time’, a poem hinged on the undue religiosity of the masses. The two poems provide a two-way dialogue between the poet and his audience aimed at jolting the people out of a religion-induced dormancy to a critical engagement of the oppressive tendencies of the military. Dedicated to Tanure Ojaide – and, in fact, an intertextual response to Ojaide’s poem of the same title, ‘Waiting’ begins with a statement that points to the theme of self-examination lying deep in the poem:

We have been waiting for long:
From the dawn of history
Through the hey-days of time
Down to the doleful present. (1–4)

This is self-indictment. Why have the people chosen to wait for this long? What stops them from taking actions about their conditions? Who are they waiting for to lead them out of ‘the doleful present’? Illusorily, the people, according to the poem, have been waiting for a ‘deliverer’ (5), for ‘the magic word from the ancestors’ (6),



and all sorts of conjurers to contrive a way to take them out of their misery. This waiting is not just for years, but for decades and for centuries. In this waiting, as the poem wants us to see, is the folly of a generation's lethargy in the face of tyranny. Unlike Ojaide's poem, Othman's poem ends with optimism. After portraying the diverse layers of rot in the society, Ojaide's poem gives us a persona, a seeker of the way, like the teacher in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, who stands un-immersed in the decay and oppression of the land. However, in Othman's poem, the personas, in a collective 'we', have to go beyond waiting and singing in the drought. They must take a collective action towards the emancipation of their own souls:

We must sharpen our matchets
And practice the porcupine dance
Instead of waiting for an infertile goddess
To give birth to a deliverer. (29–32)

Herein is the thesis of self-emancipation which most of the poets writing in Othman's era often present as an option to their audiences. This is to create one's own subject position in the society.

Othman's poetic discourse begins from a negation of what it sees as craft that does not cater for the subject position of the oppressed in the society – those Akeh's 'The Living Poem' claims are the embodiment of a true poem. This discourse is first and foremost against certain (Western) discourse hegemony. It also goes against the hegemony of African modernism, or what Irele calls aesthetic traditionalism. In posing against Wordsworth's conception of poetry, for instance, Othman is also clearly taking a stand against the mythopoeia of the modernist-nationalist era. The discourse generated from Akeh's and Othman's poetry, so far, proposes a poetics which, following the discourse category of the Alter-Native order, privileges a reconstruction of the subject position of those it considers ordinary people in a nation heavily militarised. Although the poems cast a serious aspect over their subject matter, they chuckle along with puns and a careful and purposive use of words that do not constitute poetic density, on the one hand, and do not give away their poetic strengths, on the other hand. Very characteristic of the military era poetry, the poems betray a heavy reliance on the history of military oppression to create their own history and/or discourse.

Notes

1. Afam Akeh hails from the south-eastern parts of Nigeria. He lives and works in Britain.
2. 'The Living Poem' is anthologised in *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Nigerian Writing*.
3. The poem 'Three African Lives' is also anthologised in *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Nigerian Writing*.
4. The imposition of silence on the people as a means of oppression is not, needless to say, only confined to Nigeria but to the entire continent of Africa, whether under military rule, autocratic leadership or apartheid. Writing about the condition of silence in Banda's Malawi, to give just one example, Alison Jones and Domoka Lucinda Manda point out that, 'After the first, brief rapture of independence was over, Banda re-introduced the people of Malawi to the culture of silence' (13). Interestingly, the authors trace this culture of silence to the colonial era.
5. 'Silence I' and 'Silence II' are among the poems collected in *A Harvest of Laughters* by Remi Raji.
6. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the first indigenous premier of the Western Region from 1960 to 1966 when Nigeria practiced the parliamentary system. With a background in journalism and trade unionism, Awolowo was said to have developed policies that had direct bearing on the lives of the masses: the declaration of free education and health care, the formation of the Oduduwa Group which prioritises the cocoa industry, and the establishment of the first television station in Africa in 1959. He contested the presidential elections in 1970 and 1983 but failed to win; his failure generated controversy, and it was commonly said among his admirers that he was the best president Nigeria never had.
7. This is the case when the dictator Ibrahim B. Babangida took over power. Wole Soyinka, one of those who welcomed him into power, writes in his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*,

[but] first, how [...] did Babangida succeed in enjoying, at least at the beginning, a quite remarkable level of national acceptability? The answer to that was straightforward: he rode to public favour on the brutal and hypocritical record of his predecessor, Muhammadu Buhari, one devil for whom, in my calculation, no spoon existed that was long enough to justify the risk of even an impromptu snacks. (222).
8. General Abacha, in a sudden twist of fate, was said to have lost his life in a sexual orgy with prostitutes. The British journalist Karl Maier captures this aspect of Nigerian history thus: 'It began on June 8, 1998, when Abacha, on his customary nightly excursion into the pleasures of the flesh, expired while in the arms of a pair of Indian prostitutes. The official cause of death was a heart attack, although unsubstantiated rumours abounded concerning his demise' (4).



9. See Remi Raji (20–35).
10. It is a common, public discourse in Nigeria that the three regions of the country namely the north, south and east were amalgamated in 1914 by Sir Frederick Lugard without any proper consideration of major diversities; the design was to create one of the strongest colonies of Her Majesty in Africa. Some of the poets of the military era have versified this history. See Ogaga Ifowodo's 'God Punish You, Lord Lugard' in his volume *Madiba*.
11. See Chinua Achebe (157–160).
12. Abubakar Othman is one of the few poets of this era that hail from northern Nigeria. He lives and works in Maduguri, Borno State.
13. David Lodge writes: 'Wordsworth's effort to purify the language of English poetry entailed forcing it back towards the metonymic pole: hence his insistence in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads that there was no essential difference between poetry and prose [...]' (118). This tendency toward bridging the gap between the language of poetry and of prose is, all ramifications considered, the theoretical thrust of the Alter-Native sub-tradition and subsequently of the military era.
14. From Odia Ofeimun's 'Resolve' to Osundare's 'Poetry Is', and to Toyin Adewale's 'Safari', the examples are replete in Nigerian poetry in English that the poets, faced with social realities, oppose the doctrine of the mere worship of nature inscribed in Romanticism. In Adewale's poem, for instance, the persona insists on writing a verse 'dripping with fire and gutters', not 'about trees and constellations'. See her collection *Die Aromaforscherin*.
15. Expectedly most of the successful coups were announced at dawn. For instance, the successful coup of the Buhari-Idiagbon regime was announced through a dawn broadcast by the then Brigadier Sani Abacha (see Osaghae, 166).
16. Talking of the immense advantage of night to the activities of the coup plotters in Africa, the character Colonel Briggs in Nwosu's *Alpha Song* says that when the coup in which he is involved succeeds, they will establish a Ministry of Night (180). In this parody one can discern the place of night in coup plotting and other nefarious activities of the military.
17. During the regimes of this duo, Nigeria made much money from crude oil: in the Babangida junta, for instance, Nigeria benefited a great deal from the market created by the Gulf War, enjoying the first windfalls in the history of Nigeria's oil sale. See Eghosa E. Osaghae (188–267).
18. Structural Adjustment Programme, ubiquitous in Africa, was part of the Breton Woods panacea for poverty in Africa and other third worlds which did not only overwhelmingly fail, but marked the beginning of economic downturn in most African nations.
19. Maryam Babangida's Better Life Programme for Rural Women was formed in 1987. Maryam Abacha's Family Economic Advancement Programme and Family Support Programme were set up in 1993.

20. General Babangida, priding himself as the only military-politician with the messianic duty to return Nigeria to a democratic rule, had surprised Nigerians with government-sponsored National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). Though he got the usual applause, some Nigerians were sceptical of his intentions which eventually manifested in the shocking annulment of the 1993 general elections.
21. Kaduna was the capital city of the defunct northern region of Nigeria ruled by Sir Ahmadu Bello, noted for his political sagacity and a purported extra-ethnicist drive to bring the peoples of northern Nigeria as one. To some extent he was said to have succeeded in instilling this populist philosophy among the northerners, just as his counterpart, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, did in south-western Nigeria. Kaduna then was the quintessential mecca of politicians in northern Nigeria. After the 1966 coup that took Sir Ahmadu Bello's life, and the subsequent civil war that engulfed the nation, Kaduna became invaded by dishonest politicians, military coup plotters, bigots and tribalists. Kaduna became the home of the so-called northern mafia that claims to control the politics of Nigeria to date.
22. Arewa People's Congress is a pressure group that claims to protect the interest of people from northern Nigeria. Formed in 1976, Ohaneze Idigbo is the highest Igbo cultural group in Nigeria which also operates as a pressure group. It claims to foster unity (social, cultural, political) among the Igbo people. Oodua Peoples Congress, OPC, is a pressure group made up of only Yoruba people formed to help actualise the annulled mandate of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba man, in 1993.



Dissident Dirge: Elegy *Against* the Oppressor

And why have so many Nigerian poets persisted in pitching
their writing against successive regimes in this way?

— Stewart Brown, 'Still Daring the Beast: Niyi Osundare and
Contemporary Nigerian Poetry.'

Introduction

Dirge poetry is rooted in African oral traditions (Okpewho, 156–162; Finnegan, 146–148). It conceptually stages a celebration of departure (i.e. death) principally bringing to the fore one of the nodal points in the interface between the region of the dead and that of the living. The belief is that death, especially that of a highly placed person in the community, is celebrated but within the elegiac orbit of regrets, had-I-knows, if-onlys, lamentations, and the renditions of (real and imagined) past achievements. Traditional dirge poetry thus foregrounds a certain paradox (i.e. celebration through lamentation). It institutes itself as a vital aspect of the communal life – necessarily all-inclusive because it is destined that everyone shall die, and also because the connection between the living and the dead belongs to a sphere of the communal life in which inevitability and inviolability are established as a terrain of cultural philosophy. The death of anyone at all (be it an adult or a child, female or male) occasions a mournful rendition which instantly brings to the fore the wickedness of death, and then goes on to recount the good (never the evil) deeds of the dead, and then climaxes in the invocation of the dead (now deemed to have acquired supernatural powers). What is of importance for us here is the predication of dirge on death: dirges tend to occur only when there is death. If there is dirge without death, then there is something we can call a symbolic death, a death-like incidence, apocalyptic, capable-of-erupting dirge. A very vital aspect of death is nostalgia. Contained in dirge rendition, for instance, are certain vivid

recalls of what the dead did in the past, especially the public ones that affect the life of the community.

The Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho is outstanding in deploying his traditional Ewe dirge to mourn what he considers the killing of his nation by bad politicians (Okunoye, 91–111; Fraser, 334). His volume *Harvest of Our Dreams with Elegy for the Revolution* contains poems that bewail the descent of his nation to the nadir of hope in spite of the so-called revolution of the 1980s. Following Anyidoho, it is what they consider the symbolic death of their nation that the new Nigerian poets here mourn, raising a collective rendition of dirges that have come to particularise their poetry distinctly. Or, since in the real sense what we call dirge poetry may have started with the Alter-Native era, dirge rendition increasingly acquires affective intensity as the Nigerian polity towards the late 1990s was said to have totally sunk into despair and despondency. From what practically is a depth of frustration, a lamentation bursts out with individual voices collectivised in a threnodic wail, cultural, national, and all-embracing. Theorising on the dominance of threnody in new African poetry, Gloria M.T. Emezue in her book *Comparative Studies in African Dirge Poetry* opines that

[T]hese poets lament the betrayal of the people's genuine aspirations for a better life, poverty, unemployment and the dilapidated state of the nation's economy. Their anger over the vicious cycle of brutality that diminishes the [nation] is unmistakable. It is this form of threnody ushered by these young men that has come to be known as the new generation of poetry. (126)

Though collectivised by a threnodic thrust, the new poetic voices are diverse, disparate, deliberately individualised, a deviation from the gregariousness, the fraternal spirit, and the Marxian exuberance of the poets of the Alter-Native sub-tradition. The poets recognise the miscarriage of good governance and its attendant woes as the greatest crisis in Nigeria. They consider it their duty to confront the crisis, and take different thematic and stylistic routes to do so. They write as insiders implicated in the intense persecution and the struggle for self-liberation, their tones leaning towards pessimism. Pius Adesanmi concludes that '[with] the Nigerian state making the country unsafe even for a generation as young as ours, we had no option but to evolve what I will refer to as an aesthetics of pain [...]. We wrote lyrics of pain, of hopes and dreams tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system' ('Europhonism, Universities, and Other Stories', 122). The dirge poems of the military era are, in view of the above, characterised by a certain intense emotion collected not in tranquillity, as we have seen in Othman's 'Wordsworth Lied', but in outrage, angst and anguish. 'Whenever a poet,' Emezue writes, 'utilises the threnodic voice in his poetry, such poems differ in terms of the sentiments expressing despair, gloom, hopelessness, melancholy, despondency, discouragement, bitterness, desperation,



and shock' (124). Emezue goes on to say that '[j]ust like somebody stung by death, the sensitivity of the poets stung by political and military despotism sees a bleak future ahead for [their] nation' (129). The dirge poem, even if expressed in the singularity of individualism, favours a communal voice, one that claims to encompass diverse woes with which it constructs a national narrative. Although the narrative is mainly pessimistic, there are also compulsive, powerful orchestration of optimism (such as in Ezeanah's poetry) whereby the poet foresees an end to the crisis of leadership in Nigeria. But it does seem untenable to categorise the poets into the group of those who are pessimistic and those who are optimistic because in a single collection of a poet, for instance, there are poems that clearly express pessimism and those that clearly express optimism. With the poetry of Olu Oguibe and that of Ezeanah, the remaining part of this chapter attempts to demonstrate the unrelenting communal voice of the military era poets whose dissidence discourse is most enduringly expressed through the mode of dirge.

Olu Oguibe: *I am Bound to this Land by Blood*

Oguibe's poetry, intensely threnodic and deliberately combative, is, in a sense, an angry wail recollected in caustic imagery.¹ Its singular concentration on the phenomenon of military despotism in a bardic outburst, nationalist tone, apocalyptic images, and, above all, an idiom centred on a strong affinity or sympathy between the persona and her nation stands out as perhaps the most expressive lamentation to have come out of the military era poetry. Lengthy and often rambling, each poem in Oguibe's collection *A Gathering Fear* is a kind of a metaphorical armoury already in an obvious state of disability but, nevertheless, containing an acerbic tongue that considers itself more powerful than the dictator's guns. This, in effect, is what 'The Voice', the first poem in the collection, a kind of introit, demonstrates. Personified as the insistent, persistent, persevering and fearless poet-persona, the voice is a raging one, defiant in its penetration. The poem depicts the desperation of the oppressor and his cohorts to exterminate the persona whose voice disturbs their consciences. They are practically, physically after the persona, but his voice, like 'a dagger', stabs their souls. With such sharp metaphors running through the poem, it dramatises the potency of the seemingly lonely and innocuous voice to disconcert those who have chosen to be anti-human. The voice, the poet or the singer of conscience, does suffer in the hands of those who are after him. They all take violent measures to exterminate the voice. They 'clobbered' it to the extent that its blood splashes on their hands. Their aim is to kill the voice so that they can have peace, so that they can perpetrate their evils without anybody singing against their consciences. But the voice continues to 'howl', which is to say all their efforts to silence the voice fail:

That voice sprouted again and
 Crawled into their skulls and began to howl
 His voice walked ahead and came behind
 And rocked the earth like a storm. (32–35)

The insinuation at the end of the poem is that the voice, the poet, the artist, indeed the conscience of the nation, survives where his killers cannot survive. Oguibe's projection of the age long quarrel between the poet/writer and the establishment, in such a vivid drama, is not only engaging, but it also reflects the poetics of rage that Oguibe has so well deployed. The emphasis is that the writer is constantly hounded by the oppressor, yet he is determined to speak through his writing against the oppressor. Notice that the writer deliberately 'Crawled into their skulls and began to howl', a metaphorical way of representing the wilful commitment of the writer to the duty of liberating his society from the grips of the destroyers in spite of the odds. The persistence of the voice, its ubiquity, its endurance and energy, its capacity to 'rock' the earth, to disarm and dismantle the cruel system, exemplifies the victory of the pen over the gun, a message the poem undoubtedly wants its readers to clearly get. It is this tendency or tradition running through poetic discourse categories in Nigeria that prompts Stewart Brown to conclude, having posed the question used as epigraph, that 'the defining characteristic of Nigerian poetry in English has been its confrontational attitude to authority' ('Daring the Beast', 97).

The persona's cries, both as a lamentation for the oppressed nation and as an attack on the oppressor, crystallise in and constitute the thematic texture of, 'I am bound to this land by blood'. Perhaps the strength of this poem is in its deployment of blood as an image both in the sense of relationship (as between two persons of same parentage) and in the sense of destruction that results to bloodletting. The blend of these two senses is telling in that the poem establishes through memory, nostalgia, and presence the near-death condition of the nation it narrativises, and the struggle by the persona to not only stay afloat the bleak condition but to also, by sheer selflessness, remain in the service of keeping the land afloat. The persona states his attachment to the land from the beginning of the poem:

I am bound to this land by blood
 That's why my vision is blurred
 I am rooted in its soil
 And its streams flood my veins
 I smell the sweat of its men. (1–5)



Another way to put it is that he feels bound to the land by birth. But the image of an unclear vision following that relationship speaks of some abnormality, which is later described in the poem. Also latent in this opening of the poem is the persona's desire to perform a duty for the land. Since he is inseparably attached to the land, given the image of the land's streams flooding his veins, whatever duty he performs for the land, he performs for himself. This overtly underscores the striking patriotism that runs through Oguibe's poetry. But the persona too, like the land with whom he is bound, is in a disadvantage and it would soon be made clear what kind of danger they face.

In what looks like an eyewitness account of an oppressed people, the persona proceeds to touch all aspects of socio-political inadequacies in his land. The land he describes is full of destructions both of property and of human beings. It is a land where the persona sees nothing other than a river of blood. The image of blood easily connects to the idea of death; the symbolic death of the nation.

I am bound to the dying mother the widow
 The man with a weight on his loins
 I am tethered to their moan they are my own
 I belong with they who have no voice
 They who trudge outside the gate
 Those who sigh in their hearts
 Who only shake their heads. (34–40)

The persona feels a sense of duty, being organically connected with this land, to mourn those who have fallen victims of oppression. To be one with the nation, as this poem ultimately depicts, is to be one with its oppressed people, the authentic subject of dirge. It is clear throughout this poem that the people are incapable of confronting the establishment; in fact, they are not even able to raise their voices in alliance with the persona's voice. They symbolise in essence the collapse of the nation, the very cause of the persona's unrelenting threnodic wail. Although the persona earlier says that his vision is blurred by the immensity of violence around her, it is easy to discern the clarity of her vision in pursuing a commitment rooted in common experiences in the land. The social experience of the poet is of primary concern here. Chidi Amuta has pointed out elsewhere that in Nigerian literature, 'social experience is the primary source of literature' ('Literature of the Nigerian Civil War', 85).

The dirge in Oguibe's poetry is predicated on two things: a heartfelt empathy for the dying, for the dead; and a combative stance against those assumed to have caused the death. These issues are most coherently expressed in 'A Gathering Fear', a long

poem in which the persona takes a swipe at the successive military despots who have plundered the land. More than any poem in Oguibe's oeuvre, 'A Gathering Fear' pointedly describes the cataclysmic consequences of the undue militarisation of the Nigerian state. Indeed, one can assume that in the rise of political poems inspired by military dictatorship in Nigerian literature, this poem is not only among the first, it remains one of the most successful ever written, given what one might call its appropriate mood. The ambience of apocalypse generated in and by almost all of Oguibe's poems crystallises in 'A Gathering Fear'. The opening of the poem is interesting: the fear is not gathering as the title says; the fear is already there. The poem uses the images of animals, such as vultures, considered to be evil in African world view to portray the evil-minded dictators. It goes on to refer to the destroyer as 'the rampaging bull' (21). The poem brings up the issue of sycophancy, referring to the privileged ones in the society who support despotic leaders because of what they get as benefits. Their drums of joy, the poem emphasises throughout, mingle with the plaintive cries of the oppressed people. The poem emphasises the fate of the widows and the orphans. It also emphasises that those killed do not have the luxury of being buried. This is the height of state organised cruelty in Oguibe's loved land. Like most poems of the military era, this poem does not shy from naming names of those it considers responsible for spilling blood in the land. They are:

Generals
 Sergeants
 Warlords
 Who feed on blood

 Carrion-eaters
 Pallbearers
 Tin gods who reap
 Where they did not sow. (105–112)

They are soldiers. And since soldiers use guns, an awful weapon that can kill at a snap of the fingers, it is clear why the land is filled with fear. They trample the land, their guns at the ready; nobody can question their unbridled powers. The consequence is terrible, fatal:

Now the aged and the bled
 Have taken to the streets
 And dead children curl up
 In the fields like dry leaves. (127–130)



The poem's image here, as other images interspersed in the earlier sections, simply provokes tears. His emphasis on the tear-provoking fate of the old, the widows and children, makes the poem achieve a tone of mournfulness intended to go deep into the minds of those who have human feelings. It plunges into pessimism. The tone is a helpless one in these disturbingly rhetorical questions: 'And who can save this moment? / Who can hold back an earthquake?' (140–141). The situation is totally bleak. What the poet sees is catastrophic:

Ah!
Death knocks at the door of this nation
Death struts at the city gates and there is no escape
Death has appeared on horseback
Ahead of his ravaging calvary
And the city walls are crumbling
The barricades are crumbling. (156–162)

It is remarkable that Oguibe's dirge poems also foresee what the future holds in the form of bleak prophecy. This poem written during the regime of Babangida effectively tells of the severe inhumanity to come with the Abacha regime. In a land such as this even the poets who, like the persona of Oguibe's poetry, have resolved to mourn the land and confront the oppressor would take to self-exile, as Oguibe and many poets of this generation eventually did.

But exile is not an easy way out, as 'A Song from Exile' depicts. It is one of the early poems about the experience of exile in Oguibe's generation of writers. The persona speaks as an outsider who has fled the land because of the fears and oppression in his land. It does effectively show that the persona with an irrepressible voice is now aware that at some point, if he does not escape, he would be wiped out by the cruel death prowling the land, and there will be no one to mourn him. It does also show that going into exile is not the end of the dirge rendition, as the persona's insistent voice even wails louder in exile. The emphasis is still on the people, the masses, those who, unlike the poet, cannot go into exile. The persona still considers them as his people; he is bound to them by blood. In the beginning of the poem, the persona points out that he does not go out of the land on his own volition; he leaves the land so that he may live. But he leaves his voice behind in the land. The idea of leaving behind his voice is meant to stress that exile does not in any way sever the persona from those for whom he sings.

The lamentation in this poem is two-pronged, and takes into account the inadequacies of the life in exile. While the persona laments the killing of the innocent ones back in his country, he also laments the condition of life in the new

land, especially the inclement weather and the excruciating loneliness associated with the exile phenomenon. The persona keeps pointing out that although his life is now safe here, the weather does not suit him, the people in the land are not friendly to him, even those who have come from the same land with him from whom he expects hospitality.

Drenched to the bone
With my rage and shame
There is only memory
To cuddle for warmth. (39–42)

But the memory is not a good one, as the poem goes on to relate. Aside from his memory, the persona consoles himself with a conscience that justifies his coming out to this strange land. For a person with an unsurpassing love for his land, as we have seen in the previous poems, to go into exile, he needs a conscience not only to rationalise such self-exile from the land he claims to love, but also to keep him perpetually connected to the beloved land. Which is why the persona says ‘Conscience makes my bed with a quilt of thorns’ (69), a metaphor that depicts the constant self-examination to which the persona puts himself. This self-examination is not a pleasant thing. The entire poem is actually a testimony to the effect that exile is not a home, but an alternative for the purposes of survival. But in spite of the conscience the persona must have, there are constant nightmares that remind him of the horrible things in his homeland. This poem returns to the idiom of blood here. The persona dreams of a ‘great sea’ that turns out to be a sea of blood. The sea, with all the violence seen in it, is a reference to Nigeria, pillaged and wasted by soldiers. The importance of this imagery is that Oguibe shows how Nigeria’s natural resources, like the River Niger and River Benue and the wealth residing in the Niger Delta turn out to be curses instead of blessings to Nigerians. In this sea, which ought to be a great resource for the land, the persona sees people drowning. Again, the picture is that of a catastrophe. But the worst of the nightmare is the one in which the persona sees his own mother being whipped in his presence. This is to feel the condition in a more emphatic way. More than that, it signifies that having escaped to a strange land does not mean he has ceased being a victim of dictatorship. The pain his mother has from being whipped is his pain. Eventually, this poem brings up love and patriotism. There is no amount of the evils of the soldiers against the land that can take away the persona’s love for the land.

It is that patriotic love reverberating with optimism that inspires the poem ‘For You, Nigeria’. It is a long apostrophic monologue in which the persona talks to Nigeria, his nation, expressing love, filial attachment to her, and lamenting that he fails to love her the way a mother ought to love her children. The relationship is, therefore, that of a son-mother relationship that is held together by unequal



love – his love for his motherland is unrequited. The persona states his love and attachment to the land thus:

for I am you
as you are me
and you are the mother
as I am the child
and nothing can stand
between the offspring
and the womb. (12–18)

But, as expressed in other poems, the land cannot love him because of the people that are at the helms of affairs. The mother (to return to Oguibe's imagery) also loves him but she is totally bereft of the skills of care for him because those who rape her have incapacitated her. Oguibe's poems are characterised by these shortcomings of the mother country. The shortcomings have to do with the inability of the land to cater for its underprivileged masses. These are the shoemakers, the blacksmiths, the road and rail transport workers, the market traders, the truck-pushers, the bus drivers, and a lot of people in that class of the society. The persona's anger surfaces again when he tells the land, his mother, in a serious tone that:

Let your hyenas, vultures, emperors, chiefs
Your governors, generals, gunslingers, thieves
Those murderers and pimps who run your affairs
Keep their hands off me
I am a child of the war
I have bitterness in my blood. (100–105)

The war the poem refers to is the Nigerian civil war which caused a serious setback for the nation. The war is one of the things the persona, like the persona of Uche Nduka's poetry, holds against Nigeria as part of her injustice to him. It is, however, important that the persona seems to have an honest, patriotic stance towards the land: he loves the land as his mother but he is not blind to the land's inadequacies.

Oguibe's poetry builds a steady focalisation of anguish that exemplifies the dirge rendition of the military era poetry. From the personal to the national an attempt is made to raise a single wail of a voice for a nation already dead, or destined to die. This voice finds fraternity in other voices raised in the works of other poets, voices bound to construct a dissident discourse in spite of the imminent death hanging over them in the land.

Chiedu Ezeanah: *I Saw Generals Hack the Tracks with Convulsive Steel*

The dissident dirge embodied in Ezeanah's poetry strikes one as an outburst of a tortured soul.² It gives one the sense that the poet is engaged in his last fight to rescue himself and other victims from the grip of the military oppressor. Never shying from naming the 'generals' or the 'soldiers', Ezeanah's poems, like that of Oguibe, feed on and feed the daily happenings of the 1990s in such a way that any proper interpretation of them ought to begin from their historical axis even though their poetic qualities assert themselves. Ezeanah has a penchant for calling his poems 'songs', and attempts to give them certain musical quality in the forms of modulated rhythm and repetition. The poems are always in stanzas, arranged in sequences, but thematically bound by a common thread of historicity and thematics. Ezeanah's poetry characteristically achieves a blend of craft (in the form of metaphorical language) and common affairs (in the form of daily happenings). For although the poems easily betray their discursal intentions some of them are particularly distinguished by sensitivity to stylised literary ornamentation. Ezeanah's poems are collected under the title *The Twilight Trilogy*, his only poetry volume to date.

'Endsong' is a long poem in ten short sequences, numbered 'Endsong I' to 'Endsong X'. A single persona, we may call him the singer-persona, speaks through all the sequences. This persona powerfully realises the stridency of lamentation. The first sequence at once takes us into the police state or failed state about which the persona has decided to raise a threnodic tone. It is a short, nine-line poem, better quoted entirely:

Soldiers came to town in the daylight
 And killed the whole town
 They shot me in the leg
 And left me for dead in the night
 I was alone in the dead town
 And days after still hiding under the grass
 Somebody heard my song
 And helped me to the City of Tents
 If it wasn't for my song, I'd be dead!!



The surface of this poem is a simple narration: we see a character, an action and a setting, and none of these is made obscure by the language and style. But almost all the plain words here are deeply metaphorical, and only when we make recourse to its metaphorical depth would we be able to fathom the profound elegy that this poem prefaces. The coming to town of soldiers is an invasion by the military of the singer-persona's nation, and this is done in daylight, which refers to the sanity, the rule of law, or the democratisation process that the soldiers' invasion unsettles. This contradicts the soldiers' statement of purpose whenever they invade, ie that they only strike to rescue the nation from total chaos caused by the regime, whether military or civilian.³ But the singer-persona, like most intellectuals in the society (whose views were often inconsequential under military invasion), thinks that under no circumstances should the military strike, especially as it often became clear in Nigeria, after a short while, that the military would turn out worse than the erring politicians, and that in fact, the military took over power for the sheer lust of it. This lust is embedded in the hyperbole that follows: the soldiers 'killed' the whole town; it becomes a 'dead town'. What the poem means here is laid out in the sequences that follow: 'dead town' translates to the symbolic death of the nation, of a people gripped by overwhelming fear, with suffocating silence, with strangulating restrictions. When the singer-persona talks of his leg (notice the evocation of kinaesthesia here) being shot he is actually referring to the terrible state of restriction, the lack of freedom that traps the entire nation. But the persona's song is what he survives on, is what liberates him from dying along with the entire town. The poem here dramatises what Gabriel Okara calls 'the power of the Word' (78). The word as a manifestation of self-expression and self-identity has offered the underprivileged people in any society a chance to assert themselves, to negotiate and perspectivise their otherness. Writing about this, the poet Gloria Anzaldua in her 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers' asserts that 'writing [the use of the word] is a tool for piercing that mystery [or myth of superiority] but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive' (169). It is in this sense that the singer-persona presents a poem, a song, as a survivalist handle, also as a subversive construct.

In the remaining sequences of 'Endsong' the singer-persona takes us, image by image, narrating as well as lamenting, through the waste land, and succeeds in giving us a clear depiction of the havoc that comes with the soldiers' invasion. What is outlined in 'Endsong I' becomes dramatised in the subsequent sequences. The dominant themes in it are fear and silence, emptiness, godlessness, and the state of chaos caused by animalistic soldiers. The images are diverse, incisive, and provocative. The poems exude images from the common things of life, from the rural to the urban, from earthy physicality to psychic commonality. In 'Endsong II' when the singer-persona says 'Harmattan dusk darkens' (1), he talks of what his people know, what is common to them; the discourse locates itself among a people,

a real society. The singer-persona makes efforts, through sociological devices, to emphasise that his song is about Nigeria as a nation state, which he chooses to call ‘the town’ here, the locality he knows, the events he experiences, the invasion he witnesses. There is therefore something inherently *experiential* about his song.

‘Endsong II’ describes disintegration. It is a society in which ‘Hearts draw apart, moons fall apart’ (2), alluding in a single line to the disintegration in Igbo bucolic society captured in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and the deployment of the moon by Niyi Osundare as a trope to capture dehumanised Nigerians in *Moonsongs*. It is a way of building on thematic trajectory. Metaphorically the singer-persona is still the only one alive in a nation already ravaged. He invokes memory, since he has to rely on it for his survival. It is with this memory that he tells the story of ‘twin-rivers’, obviously referring to River Niger and River Benue in Nigeria. It is the song of Nigeria as a waste land he sings. The act of memory thus surfaces in ‘Endsong III’ in which the singer-persona takes us back to the beginning of the invasion. He recalls:

I saw the blighted offspring in the tides
 I saw the beloved ones procreates in fear
 I saw the uncommitted ones lost to the tides
 I saw the doped kicks of Generals
 I saw a broken age I saw rubbles I saw rubbles
 For the duration of a cloud-tide
 I saw politicians crust the air mongering phrases
 I saw generals hack the tracks with convulsive steel
 I saw villages empty their blights into cities
 I saw cities endure breaches with breaches
 I saw blacked out cities hatch a republic of the bewildered. (21–31)

Almost each line above contains a metaphor of disintegration. Metonymic representations of the soldiers’ invasion are clearly visible in the parallelisms that give us the stark collapse of the nation. The repetition of ‘saw’ evokes a deeper realm than its rhetorical deployment: it emphasises the phenomenon of being a witness to the destruction, again drawing our attention to an art borne out of experience, to an outrage emanating from experienced reality. Each poet, let us reiterate, who writes about the military, especially those we have tagged the poets of the military era, are witnesses; they particularly draw our attention to that fact. It greatly influences, really begets, the urgent, threnodic tones of their poetry and its demotic vision.



Apocalyptic vision, as we have seen in Oguibe's poetry, asserts itself engagingly in 'Endsong IV'. The singer-persona likens the destruction in her nation to the fulfilment of 'The Book' (7), that is, the Bible. It is common knowledge that the Bible, especially in the Book of Revelation, foresees the end of the world, the final destruction by fire. The poem's choice of words here leaves us almost perceiving the smell of 'the burnt-out-town' (5). People are gunned down; markets, schools, hospitals, along with worshipping places, are aflame; the air is ashen. All these are underlined by the 'savage passions spreading across the land' (22). These atrocious destruction originate from the 'Capital' (26) where 'the laws of the junta' (28) reign supreme. 'Endsong V', with a more intense threnodic tone, addresses the plundered land. The first stanza is straight to the point:

You've lost the words
You've lost the world
You reap plots of silences
As silences plot against silences. (1-4)

The overriding trope of this poem introduced here is silence. Silence here, like the silence in Akeh's poem, is an imposed one; it is one of the major manifestations of the police state into which the land is thrown. The poem widens the boundary of its metaphoric essence as it casts silence in personification and ascribes dynamic verbs to it. Silence is further seen as a nuclear, lethal weapon with which a people are wiped out from the surface of the earth. This informs the disquietingly impassioned pitch of the singer-persona's voice here:

I'll never forget the frenzy the ideologies the religions
The illusions the echoes the cries the crowds the demented the joy
The burdened eyes of the door the doors of dawn of dew
The gifts of coffins the gifts of uprooted sand
The dirges in the dark the triumphing tombs
The blood in the nights of blood
I'll never forget the intoxicated streets
The intoxicated cemeteries of youth the lunar streets
Where seasons, sadnesses
And soldiers ruin the birth
Of a small flower. (23-33)

The flowing, uncontrolled rhythms, the chaotic repetition, the infelicity of grammar ('sadnesses') all bear that sense of senseless destruction that runs through Ezeanah's poetry. The state of chaos achieved in the passage above is paradigmatic of the tales of despoliation that form the *communal* narrative of the poets of the military era. The small flower seems to be a metaphorical representation of the land which had just attained independence from the colonial government when the military invaded it. The portrayal here is acute, and jars us to the immensity of inhumanity perpetrated by the soldiers who, like brigands, have gained entrance into the town just to pillage it.

The theme of pillage, more resounding and pervasive, is consolidated through the remaining sequences. In 'Endsong VI' silence becomes really fierce and in the town there is nothing that exists except 'the violence of silence' (3), in which case silence further becomes a metaphorical representation of the military oppressor. Curfews, inordinately militaristic and deathly, replace the people's voices, their music, their culture of movement and sharing. These curfews, given the intensity of oppression, are only punctuated by 'explosions of fire' (11) which serve only to remind the brutalised people of the rule of tyranny. The silence, according to the poem, is so pervasive that not only humans but also the flora and fauna, as well as the elements, are repressed and suppressed. In their indescribable depression what they can utter are frightened moans. Hence the singer-persona says in the darkness brought upon the land one only hears the 'maimed night-song of man, moon, bird and star' (13). The singer-persona concludes that 'Except the violence of silence / No one remembered what the General said' (14–15). The (military) General is in control, ruling a 'killed' nation, with 'explosions of fire' as national policy.

But the process of killing the nation, as 'Endsong VII' shows, is a continuing one, possibly because the repressed voices occasionally burst out in pain and agitation. That is why the singer-persona can still hear the anguish of people and nature around him:

I listen still as the waters cry
 I listen still to the wailing voices within
 I listen to a thought bomb ticking, bound to silence
 I listen still [...]. (1–4)

The idea of waters crying is one that implies a sweeping condition in that it encompasses all in the land. Its inclusiveness, apart from being projected in the pluralisation of the nouns throughout the poem, is common to Ezeanah's poetry where 'I' is in fact standing for 'we', and 'we' is deployed at every given opportunity for the reification of the communal voice. The synecdochic, metonymic presence of the military is still bold. Only the singer-persona has his tongue, though broken. He



laments the absence of song, the killing of music, its replacement with the rhythms of gunshots. The image of fire is still there, running into 'Endsong VIII' where the singer-persona says 'Fires feast upon fires feast upon voices of dawn' (6). Notice how this sequence, like other sequences, represents the rush, the blind movement of the fires, in the line with noun phrases being heaped on each other, unpunctuated. With the fires the streets are filled with dead bodies:

And their corpses sing like birds
And bruises of a dream sing
Among worlds of wound. (7–9)

What this suggests is the hissing sounds, and more, the burning flesh of the people produced under the intensity of the fires. The poem here is trying to be graphic about the killing of the people in flames, a reality during the military oppression in Nigeria. During the maximum rule of the late General Abacha, people were said to have died from such conditions during pro-democracy demonstrations especially in Lagos.⁴

'Endsong IX' and 'Endsong X' draw the lamentation to a close with a glimpse of optimism. The resilient voice of the singer-persona and, in fact, his courage to throw insults at the almighty dictator heralds the optimism. The singer-persona speaks bluntly to the oppressor: 'You who rob a sleeping town sleep no more!' After describing the pain in the land, as he has done throughout the sequences, he hits an optimistic note when he says:

Heart, bleed no more, beat
Against the downfall of the tongue
From tent to tent to the terminus
To transmissions out of night. (22–25)

'Heart' stands for the collective will, the national psyche, which must rise against the anguish, the agony, the angst, of today, and must give 'tongue', which we can deconstruct as speech or a voice, to the 'tent', which of course is a representation of the displaced, the brutalised people of the land. The metaphor 'tent' is meant to evoke in us a sense of being refugees. The people of the land, in their own land, have been reduced to refugee status. The singer-persona's point is that the people in their tent should find a voice which is needed for self-assertion and self-liberation. The reclamation of the voice is the return of song, a song that the people can participate in singing, not just the singer-persona alone. In a sense then the poet-persona feels he has reached the point in which his optimism or his being alive by singing his song becomes infectious and affects the people too. So, as he points

out in 'Endsong X', the essence of song is 'crying well' (9), by which he means to sing in this perilous time is to lament, and to console the plundered nation ('injured flower'). The stridency of this crying of course signals hope, especially as the days keep coming and going: there is hope as long as

Night still falls
Dawn still breaks
Down twin rivers
Reviving hopes. (21–24)

What the singer-persona is driving at here is that as long as the soldiers who have invaded the nation are mortals, their end will surely come some day. The falling of nights and breaking of dawns push them closer to their graves. He thus foresees a future:

Let the dialogue of visions begin anew
Let the ceremonies of life begin anew
Let song mount again and again
Let our word heal our world. (29–32)

That belief in a song in the ritual of words, liberating the society is inherent in the optimism that 'Endsong' finally expresses. This reinforces the status of idioms that Ezeanah raises song to in his poetry. He believes what the poet produces is a song, and the song is inevitably elegiac in the season of anomy he historicises. Beyond crying for the destruction of the day, the poet believes, his elegy should foresee a future that heals and offers a new life. But there is a sense in which we can problematise Ezeanah's sense of optimism here. The conclusion that as long as nights fall the end of the oppressors will come one day, poses a disturbing *aporia* in the sense of optimism offered at the end. That nights will continue to fall, and dawns break, does not translate to the end of oppression. This is because, as is evident in Africa, one condition of oppression goes and another emerges just as nights fall and dawns break.

In the sequences that follow 'Endsong I–X', entitled 'Transition Quartet I–IV', Ezeanah plays down the threnody of his overall tone and furnishes an alternative history that awakens in his Nigerian audience the gritty realities of the ruse which was said to be a transition to democracy during the Babangida regime. In contrast to 'Endsong I–X' which is a generalised elegy, 'Transition Quartet I–IV' is a specific evocation of the sad dramas surrounding the unrealised transition. To fully understand this poem, therefore, there is a need to recall the 1993 transition



programme of General Babangida which climaxed in the 12 June presidential election that was annulled even though it was perceived by many to be free and fair. Political scientists, journalists and commentators on national issues in Nigeria have, in disparate ways, both captured and reflected on 12 June political crisis in Nigeria.⁵ The consensus among the diverse narratives of the 12 June is captured by Karl Maier when he writes, '[the] only other time the [military] generals allowed presidential elections, in June 1993, they annulled the vote when they did not fancy the man who won, locked him up, and kept him in detention for five years until he died' (23).

Ezeanah calls the first sequence 'A General's Aside'. He re-enacts in the poem an important incident in the history of military junta in Nigeria. It was the clever escape of General Babangida when it became clear to him, after he had annulled the elections and brought upon himself the wrath of the people, that he could no longer stay in power. He was said to have faced the risk of being disgraced out of power. His machinery, it seemed, failed to stall the ever mounting pressures from pro-democracy activists in the forms of demonstrations, clandestine crusades and guerrilla journalism, and the cultural activities, one of which is the writing of protest poetry (the subject of this book). It was under such swelling pressures that he was said to have made his famous speech to the country with which he ushered himself out of power. The cardinal point of his speech was that he was going to step aside in view of the pressures against his regime. This poem takes its life from that reality, and lays out the inordinate wickedness of the military in deceiving the society. The poem allows us to hear the voice of the dictator and in so doing brings out fully the utter wiliness of the power-drunk General:

*I stepped aside I did not step aside;
 I sneaked aside I did not sneak aside;
 I was swept aside I was not swept aside;
 I was shoved aside I was not shoved aside-
 What does it matter? Words I know have no guns
 To enthrone the regime of the tongue.
 If not the evil genius, who else could
 Have contained the Nigerian chaos
 For a decade with a mere sop of suitable syllables? (1-10)*

The conversion of positive verbs into negatives within the lines is suggestive of the intention of the general to use words to confuse the nation. General Babangida's use of the phrase 'step aside' in 1993 purportedly caused a concern among Nigerians as

to whether the military was packing out of power or not. It soon became clear that his stepping aside was indeed a temporary, really brief, respite from the military, perhaps to silence the uproarious voices of pro-democracy activists, as the Interim Government he instituted was, after a mere three months' time, chased out of power by one of his loyalists named General Sani Abacha. The regime of the tongue, the poem's metaphorical representation of a democracy, cannot take place because 'the evil genius' has plotted that the military will continue. The poem refers to General Abacha who continued the military oppression, in even greater intensity, as 'our goggled General' (18) because of his trademark dark glasses. The poem projects, through a deft subversion of language (in the manner language is subverted on the lips of the generals), the purported cleverness of the general who is able to rule a nation by a systematic ruse without facing any consequences.

It is pertinent to point out the linearity of Ezeanah's sequences in 'Transition Quartet'. The first sequence depicts the stepping aside of General Babangida whom he refers poetically to as 'the first tyrant to rise'. Using the strange, unprecedented killing of Dele Giwa, the poet gives us an insight into the sophisticated cruelty of the General. Then he ushers in the successor of the oppressor in 'Abacha', himself a harsher tyrant. The next sequence, entitled 'A June Ago', celebrates the one year anniversary of 12 June, the day in 1993 that Nigerians turned out massively to vote for their presidential candidates. According to the poem, 12 June is 'Invented by the Trickster-General' (12), a reference to the wily nature of General Babangida.⁶ The poem refers to the people and their wishes as 'The Horseman', which also refers to Chief Abiola by now considered a symbol of democracy and democratic struggles in Nigeria. The crisis of 12 June, as depicted by the poem, is anchored on the people's stolen mandate: 'We look at the stable / But no message, no horseman, no horse' (18). The people this time choose not to keep quiet over their stolen mandate; hence 'We sing the June that's outgrown guns' (19). The next sequences such as 'The Myth of the Broken Dance', 'Requiem for the Fallen Horseman', and 'Facing the Music in the Air' all capture specific events of struggles and courage in post-June 12 Nigeria. The intensity of the crisis, its use by some bad people to polarise the nation, and the continued bloodshed in the struggle are depicted in 'The Myth of the Broken Dance'. The poem speaks of the murder of Kudirat Abiola, the wife of the incarcerated purported winner of the 12 June elections, and the murders of other pro-democracy activists such as Alfred Rewane. Their deaths, because of the government's perceived hand in them, easily becomes national mysteries, with the police claiming that they were helpless. The murder of Abiola himself is captured in 'Requiem for the Fallen Horseman'. The poem eulogises Abiola with densely superlative images.



Hero alone: One despot stole the torch
The crossroads gave him. Another despot caged him.
One despot killed his wife, yet another took his life.
His world could not go back, could not go on.
He wore the whole world in his heart –
His heart could not go on [...]. (41–46)

Historically the first despot is General Babangida who ‘stole’ Chief Abiola’s mandate by annulling the elections; the second is General Abacha who, in order to put 12 June behind him and rule Nigeria, threw Chief Abiola into prison; the third of course is General Abdusalami Abubakar in whose regime Abiola was said to have been poisoned to death with a cup of tea.⁷ No matter how large a heart Chief Abiola was said to have possessed for Nigeria, given his wealth and level of philanthropy, the tyrants refused to offer him an opportunity to lead the people. This poem both recounts this vital dislocation in Nigeria’s political life and laments the pitiable fate of a man and a nation.

Ezeanah’s ‘Transition Quartet’ is a poem, overtly political, that laments the failure of Nigeria to transit from military junta to civilian government. Like Akin Adesokan’s *Roots in the Sky* and Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, which also locate their historicisms at the critical junction of democratic struggles in Nigeria, Ezeanah’s poem names real names and places, and makes little efforts to disguise its subject matter. The danger of this, of course, is that in some places the poems become banal, journalistic, and watery, only rescued by Ezeanah’s frequent sparks of startling imagery. While the elegiac tone cannot be divorced from Ezeanah’s intensely political poetry, it is modulated in ‘Transition Quartet’, and embedded in the rather blunt, and often hysterical tone with which the history of military oppression is re-enacted here. Also disturbing, is the poems’ excessive eulogisation of those such as Chief Abiola and Dele Giwa whom it presents as cultural heroes. There is the poems’ stubborn will to tell what they consider is the truth, which is to counter the hegemony of military discourse. The poems do not mince words, and in each sequence, we can discern a sense of cultural struggle, the conviction that artistic historicisation is aimed at serving a nation and humanity.

What is interesting about the elegiac mode is that the poets, in their helplessness and in their threnody, are able to counteract, through artistic energies, the moves of the all-powerful military despotism, thus attempting to rescue their nation. While it is clear that they were also part of the victimhood during military oppression, they refused to let that condition silence them. They therefore present a picture of a child that is being beaten, and crying, and yet fighting back. And, in the courage to fight back is the underlying optimism injected into the nation to make it outlive the cruelties of the military generals.

Notes

1. Born in 1964 in Aba, Nigeria, Olu Oguibe studied in Nigeria and Britain. A naturalised American, he is a Professor of Art and African-American Studies and the interim Director of the Institute for African American Studies at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.
2. Chiedu Ezeanah studied at Ibadan and was an active member of the Poetry Club. He has worked as a journalist and a banker in Nigeria. He lives in Abuja where he frequently partakes in literary activities.
3. For instance, in his first broadcast General Babangida cites the failure of the Buhari regime and what he and his colleagues thought was the subsequent collapse of the Nigerian economy as the main reason for the coup that ushered him in. For more on this, see Eghosa Osaghae (188–207).
4. For some accounts on the killing of pro-democracy activists, see Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Note*; Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror*; Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*; and Eghosa E. Osaghae's *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*.
5. See, for more on the 1993 elections, Attahiru M. Jega's *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria*; Wole Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*; Tunde Babawale's *Nigeria in the Crisis of Governance and Development: Retrospective and Perspective Analyses of Selected Issues and Events*; and Matthew Hassan Kukah's *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria*.
6. Writing about General Babangida's insincerity and deviousness in executing his own transition plan, Wole Soyinka in his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, gives this vivid picture:

He [General Babangida] decided on election dates, postponed them, banned and unbanned politicians at will, detained some and released them, set down rules and impossible conditions for the registration of parties, set the same rules aside, promulgated two ideologies [...] created two political parties that would supposedly reflect both, wrote the party constitutions, built two identical headquarters in the capital of each state of the federation, subsidized individual contenders simply to engage false hopes, changed the balloting system, the primary system, and so on, then began all over again. (347)
7. For more on the killing of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, see Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*.



5

Myth and Materialism: Deploying Myth against the Myth of Power

For let it always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt
to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions.

— Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*

Introduction

While some of the poets of the military era, especially those whose poems are critiqued in the previous chapters, work under the impression that nationalism, or the nationalist imagination, over-determines their poetics, others, such as the ones whose poems we turn to in this chapter, and in the subsequent chapters, choose to approach their subject-matter, no less political, through modes that range from mythology to gender-conditioned aesthetics and to environmentally induced thematics. With the poetry of Maik Nwosu and Onookome Okome, this chapter attempts to demonstrate how the poets deploy myths as a mode of executing an act in the form of poetic discourse. For Nwosu, mythology implies a broad-based texture of mythic narratives, irrespective of origins, that are accessible and can be appropriated to the cause (the type the poet ascribes to himself) of writing. His sense of mythology is thus eclectic. On the other hand, Okome roots his sense of mythology in his traditional homeland, investing poetic nuance on the mythic narrative of the mermaid in his birthplace.

It should be pointed out from the outset that Nwosu, Okome and their contemporaries are not the first Nigerian poets in English to be fascinated with myths and deploy them in the way they do. Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and J.P. Clark-Bedekeremo have earlier on deployed myths, African and non-



African, in their imaginative works.¹ Mythology also attracts the attention of some of the writers of the Alter-Native order, but from a different perspective. Poets and playwrights such as Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan, conscious of countering the appropriation and valorisation of mythology by their precursors, question and even ridicule, a myth-centred national narrative.² For Osofisan, myths could be used not only for the perpetuation of a personality cult or a self-glorifying poetic persona, but also for foregrounding a collective consciousness towards self-emancipation. Victor Ukaegbu, for instance, writes of Osofisan's use of myths to privilege 'revolutionary option over impotent silence' (179).

For Nwosu and Okome, as for their contemporaries or for some of their immediate predecessors, myths constitute a mode of communication. As the epigraph above shows, myths, for myth makers, are generally inventions to cushion inner intuitions. But this is only understood if one stands at the vantage point of inventing myths. For most people, especially the kind of people on behalf of whom the military era poets claim they are engaging in a counter-discourse with, myths are regarded as narratives that impose themselves on humanity as ways or manners of instituting conventions. This is the position of anti-establishment poetics. For instance, the myth of Robinson Crusoe in Western epistemology has been challenged, especially by Marxists, as one of the means through which a certain form of bourgeois sensibility is instituted. Jean Baudrillard considers it as 'the bourgeois avatar of the myth of terrestrial paradise' (quoted in Wolfreys, 159) maintained not only for its origin but also for its culmination. Feminists too are known to be highly suspicious of (traditional) myths. In her introduction to *Gender Perceptions and Development in Africa: A Socio-cultural Approach*, Mary Modupe Kolawole declares that '[m]ythology provides the *raison d'être* for gender inequality, oppression and diverse harmful practices against or involving women' (3). In this premise, for any poet or writer concerned with the fate of their nation in any materialist conception, as were most Nigerian poets of the military era, the appropriation of myths would involve what one might see as a radical investment of materialism in mythology. Materialism here, conceived in its broadest sense, sees the historical and social reality, and the condition, of humanity in material terms. Whether *historical* or *dialectal*, materialism disrupts the complacency of a myth and imposes duties on it, one of which, in respect of the Nigerian condition, insists that the myth cannot transcend the material conditions of the ordinary people. These poets, then, force myths into a discourse formation that paradoxically seeks to contest conventions, especially in the aspect of power play, that are themselves mythical.

What ensues, as ironic as it seems, is the use of myths for a materialist critique of the society groaning under the weight of military oppression. Such critique would be defined, in Teresa L. Ebert's words, as



a mode of knowing that inquires into what is not said [...] in order to uncover the concealed operations of power and the socio-economic relations connecting the myriad details and representations of our lives. It shows that apparently disconnected zones of culture are in fact materially linked through the highly differentiated, mediated, and dispersed operation of a systematic logic of exploitation. In sum, materialist critique disrupts 'what is' to *explain* how social differences – specifically gender, race, sexuality, and class – have been systematically produced and continue to operate within regimes of exploitation, so that we can change them. (7)

It is this kind of critique that the poets here, as in other chapters, undertake with a sense of duty conditioned by the implicit demand on them (mainly from the literary tradition and their own material conditions) to institute a counter-hegemonic discourse in a society condemned to a hegemonic military regime. It then follows that these poets see myth as a mode of communication in the sense that Roland Barthes, in his radical conception of myth, sees it. Barthes in his *Mythologies* posits that 'myth is a system of communication [...]'. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form' (109). If a myth is a system or form of communication, then myths are not static, as Claude Levi-Strauss has long reminded us. '[A] mythic system', Levi-Strauss writes, 'can only be grasped in a process of becoming' (354). This process of becoming of myth is taken advantage of by the poets discussed here to articulate an existing social formation through it, irrespective of its nature, origin and aim. It is in this light that we can understand the logic of Okome's appropriation of the mermaid myth, given its various, often dehumanising imports in Africa, to undertake a poetic project that claims to protest military oppression and liberate humanity from the wrath of purportedly super-human dictators.³

For such a poetic project that seeks to redirect myths towards a materialist critique, the relationship between the poet and the myth is one that is not untroubled. So we encounter a situation where the poet-persona expresses frustration with the chosen mythic figures or gods/goddesses. In the same vein, the texts of poets who deploy myths execute their materialist critique through ways that are sometimes far from being direct. Consequently, their poetry invites a kind of reading better rooted in Pierre Macherey's idea of meaning being located mainly in the *silences* of literary works. Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*, among other things, theorises the condition of the possibility of a literary work as the constant opposition between reality and representation. A poem, for instance, achieves its being not by its capacity to mirror reality, to easily capture historical occurrence with a certain degree of coherence, but through its 'internal rupture' mostly characterised by the conflicting relationship it establishes with history or historical ideology. '[It] would not be correct,' Macherey writes, 'to say that the book [a literary work] initiates a dialogue with ideology [...]'. On the contrary, its function is to present ideology

in a non-ideological form' (149). The text in Macherey's conception is one that seeks to assert its form and at the same time is unable to disconnect itself from the history out of which it emerges. For its want of a form it is self-contained with specific language and 'intrinsic standard', but it is also not unconnected to 'the formal function of the writer and [...] the problems of his individual existence' or 'the history of literary production' from which it emerged' (61). The work thus formulates a second reality by estrangement, a situation that subsumes materiality in stylised literary orchestrations. But this is not to say the force of the work as an act is reduced, for as Macherey points out, a literary work aspires constantly to participate in a transformation that 'contributes to certain fracture lines that run deep into historical reality and into the forms in which the reality is lived, imagined and represented' (363).

Maik Nwosu: *I am Taunted by Covenants of Misery*

Maik Nwosu's published collection, *Suns of Kush*, and his *Stanzas from the Underground* relate to the poetic discourse category of the military era through certain fissures that may call to question their historicism, although the fissures themselves constitute an artistic strategy for the poet who chooses to represent realities through myths.⁴ One of the first things that strike one when reading his poetry is the numerous footnotes that explain the legendary, mythical and religious figures that so easily permeate his imagination, popping up almost in each of the poems. Nwosu dedicates a poem, 'River Legend', to his mother with this footnote: 'For my mother, whose stories, especially about the River Niger and its myths, forever bind us' (*Stanzas*, 38). This underscores his contact with myths early in life. The contact from childhood with myths, legends and other mystical figures, such as the masquerades in his immediate society, is not only a vital impetus to the realisation of his poetic aspiration, it continues to register itself, rather pervasively, in every of his poetic production.⁵ A more interesting dimension to Nwosu's self-immersion in mythology is the boundlessness of his mind-scope, that is, the unrestricted capacity of his sensibility to engage in, and with, myths, legends, fables, tales, and the likes, from anywhere in the world.⁶ The result of this expansive, unrestricted, trans-cultural, absorption of myths, legends, and fables is that Nwosu's poetry, for those acquainted with the post-independence, post-civil war poetry of Nigeria, is a dense form of versification.

Suns of Kush dramatises the predicament of the ordinary people, especially of the black race, in a society plundered by a select few most of whom are military generals. Nwosu uses myths in *Suns of Kush* to contextualise the baffling condition of life in



Africa, and of other less privileged peoples of the world. But, as with Okigbo and Soyinka, mythology for Nwosu is also a medium for negotiating individualism, for discovering and inscribing self in a social, national spirit. While Okigbo's epiphany is negotiated towards his roots, the gravitation towards the goddess Mother Idoto (the very manner in which Soyinka aligns himself with Ogun), Nwosu's epiphany is towards all the myths and gods and legends of the world that attract him although there is a uniquely Afrocentric inquest to his expansive imagination. In his poetry and fiction, Nwosu demonstrates that writing is a product of boundless influences cutting across the entire world, and here there is something of a restless imagination, as in Dambudzo Marechera, about Nwosu's entire range of creative work.⁷ It is in *Stanzas from the Underground* that Nwosu's idiom grows increasingly towards the personal, deploying memory and mystical contemplation as a mode of re-knowing, re-examining, self in relation to other selves that are fated to one destiny. The first part of this volume, captured 'for dust and dreams', realises this self-immersion in memory and, through dialogue with his precursors namely Okigbo and Soyinka, Nwosu the poet-persona speaks of ambitions and wastes, dreams and counter-dreams, and the vanities in a socially imbalanced society that tend to undermine intellectualism. In 'Children of the Crossroads', the dialogue is with his contemporaries such as Uche Nduka, Izzia Ahmad, E.C. Osondu with whom the poet-persona seeks light but are, because of the crisis of leadership in their society, condemned to the dark side of life. But the important thing running through these poems and others throughout the entire collection, is the mythopoeic projection of self-articulated in 'i malaika'. *Malaika* is a Swahili (also Hausa) word for an angel, and it is a recurring persona/motif in Nwosu's poetry. As an idiom, 'malaika' pulls Nwosu's verse towards the metaphysical, the mystical; the sublime longing to rise atop the wasted dreams and the socio-political inanities that characterise his physical world. The symbolic use of *malaika* in Nwosu's poetic imagination has sought to be the centre, the interconnection, of personal epiphany, spiritual inquest, and heightened individuation. For sure, Nwosu's poetry does not have faith in, nor advocates, social or mass action, as his fiction notably *Invisible Chapters* does.⁸ His poetry, itself originating from the subliminal depth of individualism, only seems to have faith in spiritualised individuals such as *malaika*, or *ashikodi* (in other poems and narratives) who choose to challenge the status quo, and transgress limitations.⁹ Mostly they are (self-) purified, socially and intellectually conscious figures who stand to speak on behalf of the downtrodden. In a sense, then, the poet Nwosu who writes about the people's plight in his personalised, mythologised idiom is a *malaika* or an *ashikodi*.

For anyone eager to locate Nwosu's poetry in the domain (in terms of textuality, contextuality, and the tension between them) of contemporary Nigerian poetry, that is, a poetry that shares historical grounds with Nwosu's poetry, the task is not only to deconstruct Nwosu's highly mythopoeic verse but to trace its link to events in Nigeria in the past few decades. To do this is to give perspective to

Nwosu's poetry and establish its cultural, political valency, like its contemporary poetry (such as the one critiqued in the previous chapters), and to recognise its discursive capacity as a medium for narrativising nationhood. This is to pursue the obvious, which is that socio-political events in Nigeria in the last few decades, have inflected Nwosu's poetry. Nwosu does not, like Oguibe or Ezeanah, explicitly thematise military oppression in Nigeria; he is not, like them, *openly* obsessed with the idea of an imagined nation, now ruptured and requiring the lore of protest and action from the poet to mend it. In his poetry there is a certain human universalism that brackets him with the later Uche Nduka.¹⁰ But the metaphorical signatures are there in Nwosu's poetry for erecting a reading of his poetry as a critical discourse constructed during, and about, an important juncture in the history of Nigeria. Side by side with mythical and religious figures such as 'olokun', 'ogbanje', 'kush', and 'izaga', there are explicit words, even in their densely mythological context, such as '[military] generals', 'soldiers', 'maroko', 'bull-dozers' (words not used as metaphors) that betray the inevitable connection of Nwosu's poetry to his nation.

Nwosu's poetry has that distinctive feature of bringing together concerns that are personal, social, and universal, often in lengthy poems that tend to ramble from one issue to the other and so on. His poetry distances itself, as it were, more than the poetry of his contemporaries, from the singularity of referentiality; it embraces, often in complex fusion, epistemological, ontological, cosmic, and mythological figurations. Nwosu's readings of histories, mythologies, and literatures exert a compelling force of influence on his poetry. This is a deliberate act from the poet, and it often mortgages the lyrical strengths of the poems. It is however pertinent to point out that Nwosu avoids what one may call the-poem-as-song obsession common with his contemporaries. Nwosu's poetry has the inclination to narrativise, but with a language, ie diction, that defies the sequential clarity of narration; so the implicit claim of balladry for some poems such as 'Ballad of the Peace-Keeper' and 'Ballad of the Rainmaker' is one ironic twist that runs through Nwosu's poetic imagination. Beneath his turgid language, or stylised poetics, though, is a kaleidoscopic poetic mind sensitive to even minor social issues or objects; Nwosu's poems may contain details that other poems may consider inconsequential, that perhaps only novels in their amplitude or heteroglossia can contain.

In 'Ballad of the Rainmaker', Nwosu deploys the myth surrounding rainmaking in almost all cultures of the peoples of Nigeria. The rainmaker (usually a man) is said to be a person who has magical power to cause rain to fall, especially in time of drought, or to cause rain to stop, especially when that is needed for an occasion or event to take place. The poem assumes the voice of a rainmaker, the voice of an oracle in a society, to philosophise on the drought-like situation that strikes a society metaphorised as 'the bleeding heart of the desert' (53). The metaphor of the rainmaker comes through as the facilitator of growth and development; he is thus imbued with the skill of invoking the power of fertility that a society needs for



germination and production. Though the rainmaker has the knowledge and power of prediction, and understands as well as interprets the inscrutable language of the rain to his society, he is 'taunted by covenants of misery' (7). At the same time he is 'haunted by beauties / beyond common explanation' (9–10), a paradoxical position that thinker-activists found themselves in the years of exploitation in Nigeria. The problem with the society is that the rich engage in lavish lifestyles while the poor continue to perish. The society is senselessly geared towards rapacity. The rainmaker in his wisdom foresees this extravagance on the part of the leader as a way of self-destruction. Their leaders' insatiability is shown in: '*and all rivers flow into the sea / yet the sea is never full*' (italics his, 30–31). If the rainmaker therefore succeeds in inviting rain, it will be of benefit only for the insatiable 'sea' of the land. In his pessimistic stance, the persona, in addressing rain, sees no end to the dryness in the land caused by the insufficiency of water:

you are the deluge that balms
 the bleeding heart of the desert
 still, the desert is the waste land
 – nectars scalped by breathless rosaries
 tears dried by funerals upon funerals
 and we stopped
 in the middle of the melody. (52–58)

The land thus continues to be dry; indeed a land, like Nigeria, wasted by its leaders whose incessantly wicked acts create funerals among the people. Nwosu's imagery and many allusions drawn from Christianity – he refers to the nation as 'a lost ark' (51) – and the air of religiosity surrounding the rainmaker aims to question the potency of religion in evolving a nationhood. But religion has a dual rendition in Nwosu's poetry, even in his fiction. There is, in this poem, the orchestration of religion as that part of the social life of a people, bound together by a common demiurgic concept, clearly a result of Nwosu's fascination with the Christian religion, especially Catholicism.¹¹ On this level Nwosu writes of the communal shortcoming on the part of the people, a social and societal failure hinged on the excesses of the corrupt leadership. As a people, the society has failed to take the advantage of religion in entrenching morality and modesty. There is also an orchestration of religion at the personal level, a spiritual idiom that runs through Nwosu's creative works. The persona in this poem, the rainmaker, at some point refers to herself as 'I malaika / the sand whistles are my benediction / to laughter poisoned by anticipation of pain / to welcome searching out the journey's end' (23–26).

The title poem ‘The Suns of Kush’ explores the plight of underprivileged black people as a race. Characteristic of Nwosu’s poems, the poem is subtitled ‘for the stilted urchins of forgotten villages’, and there is a considerably lengthy footnote explaining ‘Kush’. Kush is the first son of Ham in the Bible who is said to be cursed because he looks at his father’s nakedness; this cursed man is said to be the progenitor of the black race. Kush was also the name of the ancient Nubian kingdom in north-eastern Africa comprising of large areas within the present-day Egypt and Sudan. Its capital, Meroe, was destroyed by King Aeizanes of Aksum in A.D. 350. Nwosu’s formation, ‘Suns of Kush’, in his words, is in the context in which ‘suns of Kush are both those who, atop the myth of an Original Black Sin and Curse, illumine new depths of self or collective decimation and also those whose dreams and realities of self or collective extension illumine the crests of a Penultimate Black Ascension, of an Ultimate (Universal) Brotherhood of Man’ (*Suns of Kush*, 23). The use of ‘Suns of Kush’ not only as a title of a poem that speaks of the senseless rot in a society but also as a title of the entire collection, attests to Nwosu’s craving for using myths to interpret, interrogate the presence, such as the existing, disturbing misery of human beings in his immediate society. With images and symbols drawn from different places, and with allusions far and near, Nwosu, in ‘The Suns of Kush’, engages issues of despair common to human beings everywhere in the world, but especially in Nigeria. The poem begins by asking a vital question:

which master smith can recast now
the phosphorescence of genesis
or which finisher the permeating *mireacle*
of the offspring of ham? (1–4)

The importance of this question first lays on its eloquence as a rhetorical question, and then on its position as a preface to perhaps one of the most engaging, self-flagellating discourses in Nigerian poetry in English. The clue to this self-flagellation is the coinage ‘mireacle’, the seeming combination of ‘mire’ (misery) and ‘miracle’, to encapsulate the startling, nagging, oppressive state in which the black race, ‘the offspring of ham’ (4), have found themselves. And it seems no ‘master smith’ or ‘finisher’ can change this situation, or rewrite the story of this unfortunate race. The situation the poet writes of here is an alarming master-paradox, containing all those poverties in the midst of plenty, those insanities on a sane, virgin land; all those failures amidst bucolic wisdom and what the poet refers to as ‘hydra-headed paradoxes’ (14). Keeping to biblical stories and myths, Nwosu raises provocative issues about the fate of the black people in a world that seems to naturally give them all they need in abundance.



The poem in its post-colonial postulations does not in any way sound the note of a counter-racist discourse, or anti-racist racism. In other words, it raises questions, not for the colonial masters or those who imperially decimate Africa, but for Africans who have, in their own inadequacies and inefficiencies constructed the 'hydra-headed paradoxes'. The poem thus provokes intellectual thought and social action towards a total overhauling of the systems in Africa. But first it asks another vital question:

now the time is no longer
for weighted postulations
on the geography of atlantis
or the charged seminars
on the philosophy of oceania
for when the blood dries on the altar
and the horns of the beast recede no more
what is to stop little tots
demented by the compulsion
of distended tummies
from desperate acts of desecration? (50–60)

The concern of the poet here is that when children (turned urchins by the social realities in their societies) are forced to desecrate the land, then all politics of talks or all lip services to the cause of humanity must be reconsidered. The use of children here is, of course, metaphorical, a way of getting at and pricking the conscience of the society that does not care for its own future, as most of the societies in Africa have become. Children without food, on 'distended tummies', are a nation without a future, without a vision, a nation that is surely doomed to fail. Nwosu's return to the question of original sin through the myth of Kush. But Nwosu's thesis, it is clear in the poem, goes beyond locating the persistent, disturbing retrogression in Africa in the original sin. The quintessential voice of the persona emerges with a litany of woes:

i have seen citizen-refugees
crawl under eko bridge
to lie in state until tomorrow's dawn
beheld the tragi-comedy of a prostitute
towering above a recalcitrant customer
with a fist of stone in the mist of dawn

at moshalashi
but not the sack clothes
of the navel of darkness
where the royalty of ageless trunks
sometimes tramples leisurely
on the sovereignty of a dying tribe
and the plaintive dreams
of the suns of kush
are the very apogees of deferred lives. (100–114)

This is a depiction of life in the slums of Lagos, a place that is also called Eko, and hence ‘under eko bridge’. The bridges in Lagos are noted in Nigeria for being homes to the homeless, and in the night there are bizarre scenes around the bridges. Nwosu harps on this, throughout this lengthy poem, to dramatise the open sore on the conscience of Nigeria, and other similar African countries that have failed to cater for their citizens. Nwosu’s categorical statement in this poem is that the African nation-states, the entire black race, seems to have failed. And if things are to get back to normal, then the struggle has to come from each individual. The poem seems to end pessimistically:

for the suns of kush their path
branches out to all pores of the world
and both in the enchanted castles of arabia
and in the chicken farms of virginia
are their signs to be read
farewell ujaame
farewell acorns and seed-yams. (247–253)

The fate of dispersal compulsion is still with Africans. In the past, Africans were forced, through slavery and colonialism, to abandon their land and build other nations: ‘castles of arabia’ and ‘farms of virginia’ are symbolic of the two forms of colonial violence the black people of Africa suffered in the past, the invasion from the East and from the West. But today, as demonstrated in the poem (‘where the suns of kush chant down / the obstinate fable of London bridge’ (170–171)), it is the children of Kush that offer themselves willingly to the outer world, ready to suffer all kinds of anguish, for often the anguish outside their societies is presumably far better than the anguish in their societies. ‘The Suns of Kush’ is a powerful,



provocative indictment of the entire race of the black people who, in the estimation of the poet, have been unable to break free of that myth of original sin, a reality that seems to confound the poet.

If 'The Suns of Kush' is an expression of tension within the self, as its self-satirising, self-reproaching mythic stance suggests, then the ironically titled 'Rendezvous' is an extension of it in the sense that it merely provides an intersubjective dimension to that personal-cum-social tension. 'Rendezvous' too moves back into memory, into myth, to engage the contradictions, both personal and social, that characterises an affair between, possibly, a male and a female. It is a poem that recollects love, but more than that engages quite a number of issues that have to do with the social condition of the society. The poem swings from the spiritual to the physical: the male lover seems to, like Nwosu's mystical persona, bestrides both the known and the unknown worlds, and in the known world he seems to know much about life in the slums of Lagos. In other words, this lengthy poem is set in Lagos, in a slum or in different slums, with that daringly kaleidoscopic view of the condition of the poor. The figure of the oppressor, usually absent in Nwosu's poems, is visible here, in fact from the first part of the poem. Although elsewhere in the poem Nwosu figures the military oppressor and his cohorts as 'gutter generals' (225), his preferred mode of representation, i.e. the mythic mode is deployed at the beginning of the poem. Through Julius Caesar, Judas Iscariot, and Pontius Pilate, Nwosu represents the present rulers, concentrating on their high-handedness, rapacity and corruption. But Nwosu soon moves to a terrain that is familiar to us, as he increasingly shifts beyond histories and myths to the realities in the Lagos that he knows, that we all know; a place where 'transient passions truncate rooted dreams / [and] stolen pleasures truncate rooted dreams' (80–81). A much explicit depiction of Lagos slum emerges later on in the poem after a lengthy recall of a tortured imagination of life that defies personal triumphs. The persona hits on the alarming rate of violence against the poor in Lagos, first asking: 'can we laugh when the marks / on the maternity door are all blood-smears?' (211–212). This is not the blood of joy that comes with the baby but that of sadness and it implies death because with such blood the persona is 'haunted by the song and dance / smithereened in mid trajectory' (217–218). The persona is more direct when he says:

the people remember the howling laments
of the past season
when the uniformed bull-dozer
castrated the grey hairs of maroko

the kaiser's apologia was the martial music
of gutter generals:
'why should sympathies be spent
on 'roaches and bed-bugs
'roaches have no title-deeds
bed-bugs no alarm clocks
[...]
farewell maroko, your hearts will beat again
still froths the epauletted beast of the apocalypse
in gutturals:
'who is this nonentity
the spout of phantasmagoria?'
should we bandy the worth
of a litany of deaths
awaiting a single resurrection, general? (220–242)

Maroko, around which Nwosu constructs the passage above, was a popular slum in Lagos and it was demolished in July 1990 with the order of the then military governor Colonel Raji Rasaki. The inhumanity of this cruel act by the military, widely condemned at the time, is what Nwosu depicts here. The emphasis, indeed the thematic thrust of this poem, is that the people are not treated as human beings. Nwosu deploys the metaphors 'roaches' and 'bed-bugs' to show how the military regime regarded the ordinary people at that time. They are roaches and bed-bugs because the regime considers Maroko a sore sight in Lagos, where only decent houses should be built and only decent people should live in them. As the poem shows, the method of demolition is alarmingly brutal with 'uniformed bull-dozer' crushing the shanties and their inhabitants, bringing about what the poet calls 'a litany of deaths'. Nwosu weaves this into the disturbing tapestry of violence in the world in such a way that the Maroko tragedy appears small when placed side by side with 'the fires of sarajevo' (255), 'the zion trains of auschwitz' (263), and 'the chars of Biafra' (264) – very engaging allusions to the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s, the extermination of Jews by the Nazis in Auschwitz in the 1940s, and the Nigerian civil war in the late 1960s. With such wide-ranging allusions and unswerving reliance on mythology, the pessimism in this poem, rooted in man's inability to learn from history, manifests itself more increasingly towards the end of the poem. Here too, the voice of the half-human-half-spiritual persona, in spite of



her eloquence and versatility, becomes burdened with frustration and exasperation, questioning the reasoning capacity of man.

The poems in *Suns of Kush*, as we have seen, were written in the 1990s, a decade of defeat and frustration, of anguish and angst, at least in Nigeria (with worse conditions occurring in other parts of the world such as Somalia, Monrovia and Sarajevo) where Nwosu lived and wrote. Nwosu was a journalist.¹² It is reflected in his poetry that he read quite a lot and knew much about human predicaments around the world. The marriage of this knowledge and of his experiences, to his fascination with, and his re-contextualisation of, myths, fables and the Christian religion give a force to his poetry. The effects are both positive and negative: if Nwosu is a learned poet, with the tendency to mythologise, intellectualise and footnote his poems, as he proves to be in *Suns of Kush*; his poetry, ambitious in speaking about the plight of the ordinary people, is (as it ought not to be) reflexively arcane. Nwosu's poetry or, rather, imagination is, as it were, footloose, even reckless, and perhaps there is strength in its transculturality and universality. It arguably buoys its thematics so that it can easily allude to other realities at such a diachronic level that startles our sense of history. Nwosu's poetry reminds us that histories and/or myths exist, and out of them it constructs its discourse of humanism. But there is a sense in which his poetry is not *historical*, or enslaved to any historicism (like the poetry of most of his contemporaries), and thus avoids that linearity that parallels poetry and history. While it is possible to see Nigeria or its history clearly troped in the poetry of Chiedu Ezeanah or Idris Amali, for instance, it is not possible to see it so clearly in Nwosu's poetry. In other words, Nwosu's poetry, as expected (given its romance with myths and histories), shies away from being overtly political, although it is a poetry that still desires to engage social contradictions in the poet's country and in the entire world. But Nwosu's notion of poetry, if we can infer from his poetry, seems to exemplify what Macherey means when he says '[l]iterature is the mythology of its own myths: it has no need of a soothsayer to uncover its secrets' (69).

Onookome Okome: *Everything Smells of the Death of Dawn*

Regarded by his contemporaries as a tortured soul in the then Ibadan literary circle, Onookome Okome, as evident in his two volumes *Pendants* and *The Mammiwata Poems*, considers his creative imagination a fertile realm for bringing together myth and reality in a materialist critique of the political condition of Nigeria in the 1980s and the 1990s.¹³ Okome centres his imagination on the myth of the mermaid, regarded and worshipped as a water goddess in his native land. Although the

mermaid is called by many names, as reproduced in Okome's poetry, the common name Mammiwata – popular among the Pidgin English speakers of Nigeria – is the one Okome favours, as indicated in the title of his second volume. Like Nwosu's, Okome's use of the myth is instrumentalist and palpably discursive. The Mammiwata comes to assert itself as a veritable medium of communication. It offers him a voice, one that is local and rooted. This is telling because it is obvious that Okome is influenced by childhood contact with the myth of Mammiwata, and he constantly returns to it in the form of visiting his homeland, and in the form of listening to the stories of the Mammiwata frequently. It is in this sense that one identifies something of Okigbo in Okome's poetry: the return of the persona as a prodigal to the water goddess. Then there is the notion of veneration and devotion, something that almost amounts to a personality cult. Mammiwata is staged as a superior goddess, worshipped and respected by the poet-persona, set up as a constant source of inspiration and rootedness. But Okome's poetry realises itself in the wider context of love, not merely in the persona's surrendering to a water goddess. It phenomenalisises the love of a woman, of the flesh, of the great ecstasy and consolation that a woman (as a lover, wife, mother) gives. The first collection, *Pendants*, inaugurates the theme of love between a woman and a man whereby the woman acquires diverse symbolic dimensions, the referents ranging from a lover to a nation to a goddess and possibly more. One may thus agree with Jonathan Haynes in his introduction to *Pendants* that Okome's influences are traditional, national and transnational with echoes of poets such as Pablo Neruda, Ai Qing, Anna Akhmatova and Paul Engle coming through in Okome's poetry (8–10). What this implies is that Okome, following the mentioned poets, writes for the love not just of a woman but of his land – or, like his contemporaries, notably Nengi-Ilagha and Remi Raji, he takes his land as his woman-lover.

Consequently, Okome's historicism is clear and unmistakable. In his poetry one encounters words, images, symbols, and themes that reveal its intentionality as part of a wider discourse of anti-military hegemony. More vividly, Okome – and this is perhaps why he is regarded as a tortured soul – delves into personal anguish and melancholy characterised, first, by self-pity and pursuance of a love affair that proves unstable because of the precarious time; and, second, by a long-drawn dirge that forms a supplication of the persona to the goddess, Mammiwata. Okome's poetry then comes through as a long poem of lamentation about man, woman, humanity, and clearly the Nigerian polity. Wrapped in his birthplace myth of Mammiwata, it is a poem that does not only offer the poet-persona the sanity to live in a perilous time but also, in the view of this researcher, rescues the poem from reading like a drossy documentary of personal angst on the Nigerian crisis of leadership. Okome himself realises that his forte lies in the myth; that the myth offers him a powerful vehicle in a poetic journey burdened largely with the desire to contribute to human welfare. While love poetry, for Okome, offers an idiom



for poetising the socio-political realities of Nigeria during the military era, the narrowing of the personal angst to a dialogue between the poet-persona and his goddess in *The Mammiwata Poems* gainfully underscores the distinctive place of Okome's poetry in the discourse formation of the military era poetry. But to read Okome's poetry as a counter-discourse to military oppression, one has to begin from *Pendants* where, although we feel the presence of the water goddess, the poet-persona seems to be in conversation with his earthly lover.

In stanza XV of the title poem 'Pendants', the poet-persona tells his lover:

Darling, be careful. Be watchful.
The military? Be watchful.
Whatever they say, be watchful.
Bread remains bread.
Justice is justice, defined just-is.
Be watchful. Senators are savages of fading
Humanities.
[...]
Justice is just-in; supreme, yours as a being
Now that a soldier,
Major-General of the sea's emptiness
Shed the white-skin of his sea-burden
Beware –
Of the coming 'messiahs'.

The dominant tone of strain, agony and interpersonal constraint in the entire collection is shown to be caused by the activities of these messiahs who would come in the form of home-grown military generals. The poet-persona's warning to his woman is also a warning to his nation; there are several indications in the poem that it is not only his woman he is concerned about but also the ordinary people in the society. The poem 'June', with a title that draws attention to the phenomenon of 12 June in Nigeria's political life, dramatises the fear expressed in the passage above. The reality of messiahs turning to oppressors comes to manifest in what the persona sees as soldiers' 'soaring appetite' for power, for money, and for the material things of the world. Deploying images and symbols that are peculiar to the rural society that Okome knows well, the poem sees all aspects of life as victims of the military regime. It is not only humans, but 'bicycles', 'fishes', 'crabs', including 'the wind' that are cowed under the new 'messiahs' who offer the nation nothing but hunger and poverty.

It is, however, in *The Mammiwata Poems* that Okome historicises at length the military oppression of the 1990s in Nigeria. Indeed the volume crystallises Okome's struggle, seen all through his poetry, to evolve a bold voice against a totalitarian system that gags the entire nation into silence, takes freedom from individuals, including the freedom to love, crushes people's dreams and aspirations, and instils fears in the minds of the citizenry. The first two sections of the volume establish or reveal a profound connection between the poet-persona and the goddess Mammiwata – a connection that goes back to the poet-persona's childhood, to the beginnings of his ethnicity, indeed to the beginnings of things when the world was covered only with waters. The volume achieves a certain profundity here as it moves among diverse, deeply rooted, allusions mainly biblical, anthropological, historical and literary. The allusions border on the archetypal conception of a saviour figure. The poet-persona sees Mammiwata as that goddess who is the first mother and thus imbued with a wealth of empathies, readily poised to liberate her people from the grip of oppression. But, in addition to that, the idea of the Mammiwata myth for Okome implies, as we have earlier pointed out, rooting one's artistic endeavours in a place of origin. Unlike Nwosu's, Okome's mythology is local and, although there is an attempt to acknowledge the existence of other myths such as the myth of Aridon, there is generally a concentration on the intercourse, personal and social, between the poet-persona and the goddess Mammiwata.¹⁴ Expectedly, the goddess is conceived as a powerful spirit, superior to other gods and goddesses. Her prowess is rooted in water, itself a powerful symbol in Okome's imagination. Water in Okome's poetry variously symbolises life, abode, power, and finality. In the contours of the water symbolisation, the relationship between the poet-persona and the water goddess is dramatised as not being unproblematic, given the strain expressed by the poet-persona when, for instance, his childhood friend, Tega, is drawn in the water while swimming. The poet-persona in agony asks the goddess in stanza 28: 'Why do you take people like us?' The poet-persona also, in stanza 12, complains of the goddess's silence, because she is mostly inside water, 'which sounds like a hollow stone'. It resonates throughout Okome's poetry that the relationship between the poet-persona and the goddess is generally that of filiation, where the poet-persona sees himself as a subject of the goddess. Following Okigbo (Idoto), Soyinka (Ogun), and Ojaide (Aridon), and others who have affiliated their creative activities with the mythic prowess of certain gods and goddesses, Okome clearly links his poetic imagination with what he sees as the inspirational power of the water goddess. For instance, in stanza 8, the poet-persona, addressing the goddess, says,



It was in you, my beloved,
I first sang the faint dirge of weeping and knowing,
In you, the first knowledge of sun emerged into appearances
It was in you, I first touched the fertile dreams of the rain.

It is still the dirge that occupies him, that brings him before her. In other words, as the problems of his society are unending, he keeps returning to Mammiwata for inspiration and strength.

It is this act of return that opens the volume. He tells her in 'Prologue':

I return to the river
Where all things meet,
Where I stand before your laughs. (27–29)

It is she who knows laughter, not him. For he claims to have gone through the problems of life, along with his fellow humans, in the society he finds himself. The long poem (we consider here the entire volume, though divided into sections, as a long poem) thus begins with the litanies of woes he brings before the water goddess. He makes it clear from the beginning that he does not represent himself alone, but others too. This reiterates the earlier point made in this book that the poets of the military era, like their immediate precursors, believe they undertake a vicarious duty by engaging in the anti-military poetic discourse. Thus, the poet-persona declares in stanza 1: 'I stand here as the single river of our suffering'. What follows is the depiction of that suffering with images that confine themselves to the ambit of the ordinary people's life. The poet-persona speaks of 'sad music', of 'the battle cry of poverty', of wailing and of being wounded. The persona presents the condition of the people to the goddess in stanza 8:

First mother of my town,
First hope of every laughter,
This town's shoulder is wounded.
You cannot fail to see the blood.
Everywhere your name is pasted like a faint smile.
Everywhere people are wailing above your name. (10–15)

What is interesting here is that what the persona presents is not far from the goddess. This is the town that owns the river housing the goddess. The goddess, no matter how deep in water, cannot fail to hear the wailing of her people who are also the persona's people. If she does, then she is not responsible, and cannot be of any help

to those of other lands who are equally suffering. The point here is that the persona first tells the goddess of the suffering people nearest to her, who are in fact her own people. But the persona has so far established a certain filial confidence in the goddess. He imagines his capacity to even poetise the condition of the people as an intervention from the goddess who inspires him in the first place. It is between the desire to see the goddess as an inspirer and the need for the goddess to rise to the bad situation of the common people that the poet-persona traverses, seeing himself most importantly as a medium. This becomes clearer towards the end of the volume when the goddess would reply and a kind of argument would further contextualise the position of the goddess regarding the suffering land.

For the poet-persona, it is not only the people of his town, of the river Ethiope, that need the intervention of Mammiwata. The entire Nigerian nation needs her intervention. This accounts for the elaborate depiction in this volume of the post-elections chaos that erupted in Nigeria in the 1990s after the dictator General Babangida annulled the 12 June general elections. This is coherently portrayed in the stanzas beginning from number 43. The poet-persona imagines Nigeria as a family united by the desire to confront military oppression: '*We marched again. We marched on*' (Stanza 44). Henceforth, the persona's language would be conditioned by a plurality that seeks to embrace all diverse ethnic groups of Nigeria, although like most poets from the southern part of Nigeria, Okome does not fail to point out that the military dictators are from the northern part of the country. Babangida who annulled the elections was from the north. The poem places the reason for the chaos squarely on the annulment of the elections. The persona captures the post-elections chaos thus:

The sky, blue and waiting, became a sad witness.
 Meanwhile the left went right, the right ran amok.
 The names in the streets, ordinary and captive, stank of blood.
 There was blood in homes, clotted like dead waters, sleeping
 Finitely.
 Suddenly there was an uproar, a tongue of fire erupted:
 A book of violence opened in the streets,
 Silence became a story. (Stanza 44)

Notice here the image of blood, to emphasise its all-pervading presence in the poetry of the military era. As the people march, the military regime unleashes violence on them. Death, variously depicted, appears as one of the most elaborate themes of this volume. The poem even captures the moment of the annulment on 23 June 1993



followed by two days of intense street demonstrations. The street demonstrations in Lagos are depicted thus:

A heap of captured smiles walk freely in Lagos
Like the refuse of the city.

Riots are churning out decrees.
Everything joins in feeling infamous.

The cunt of today is sour.

In the streets where
The last weekend was a flag, fresh with blood,
A heap of laughter stayed canned.

The chill of remembrance overtakes my province.
Left in the streets,
Long after the murdered man's
Watch stopped at the 12 p.m. history, I asked the wind:

Is a nation born like this?

The lines are self-explanatory. Indeed, in passages like the above where Okome describes what he considers the political realities of his nation, the lines are shorn of far-fetched imagery, accentuating the historicity of his poetry. The poem captures the characters of two dangerous dictators of the 1990s, Babangida and Abacha; it captures the diverse pro-democracy struggles; it captures the travail of the peoples of the Niger Delta; it captures the endurance of Nigeria to remain one nation, though a 'family of stone'. The persona declares that 'This country is prodigal' (Stanza 62). The reader must bear in mind that here the poet-persona is presenting issues, a kind of a report, to his water goddess. He wants the goddess to see what he and other citizens of Nigeria are going through; and he wants her to intervene to possibly bring to an end such chaos and violence. The tone and tenor of the poet-persona grows extremely supplicatory as he describes those incidents. He reminds the goddess that 'Mother, you promised a burst of water' (Stanza 60), a burst that should flush away the infamous dictators and their wrongdoings.

His supplication is not unheard. She replies, acknowledging that she has been listening to his crying. She tells him: *‘My fingers reach deep in the stain of your blood’* (Stanza 68). She knows of his agony, of the people’s collective agony, even before he brings it. Through her supernatural powers she has seen the wickedness of the rulers, of the entire evil machinery that has turned the entire nation into a place of suffering. After blessing the poet-persona for having the courage to carry the tales of woes to her, she declares:

*The season does not smile.
After the lash, I promised an eruption.
After the lash promised is the final vowel of renewal.
The lips of the leaves will open up smiles.
The smile of the tongue will chew up the fire in the wind.
Up in the street,
Near where history was murdered,
The sleeves of a hidden name will tear-up the dust-cover
Of the book of your nation and
A name that is pure, pure,
Like a child’s presence, will erupt from the bowel of the sea
Deeper than any human thought.
[...]
Go my son, search the debris.
Search the creeks.
Meaning and life are stationed in the stain where you live...

This, my son, my believer
Is the beginning of your midmorning dreams. (Stanza 74)*

Although the reader does not witness the flushing of the dictators and their cohorts through the eruption of the sea, it is assumed that this time the water goddess would fulfil her promise. The expected burst will come. Indeed the triumphal tone at the end of the volume suggests that the goddess has responded positively to the petition of the poet-persona. One interesting thing in her response is the assertion that out of the chaos, of the debris, the new nation will rise. In other words, the crisis is temporary and has to be endured. If the morning dreams of the poet-persona and of his fellow citizens have been killed, what the goddess calls the ‘midmorning’



dreams, which she endorses, would not be killed. They will give birth to a new nation.

Okome is one of the military era poets who are sensitive to the myths, legends and the entire folklore of their society. As evident from his poetry, and Nwosu's poetry, the myths are not engaged purely for the sake of their artistic worth or to pursue a personality cult as is the case with the poetry of the first generation of Anglophone Nigerian poets. The military era poets deploy myths with a high sense of utility. Poetry, such as Okome's, particularly apports contemporary assignment to the ancient lore of the society. That is to say, the poets look out for appropriate myths and use them to formulate their poetic discourse on contemporary social-political conditions. From deploying love as an idiom for a critical critique of his society, Okome goes on to centre his poetic imagination on the traditional myth of the mermaid in his riverine homeland and uses it as an artistic agency for participating in the general anti-military discourse of the Nigeria of the 1980s and the 1990s.

Notes

1. The use of mythical, legendary, and religious figures are quite evident in especially Christopher Okibgo's *Labyrinths*, Wole Soyinka's *Indare and Other Poems*, and J.P. Clark-Bedekeremo's *The Ozidi Saga*.
2. In some of his plays, Femi Osofisan questions the valorisation of mythical figures that are not on the side of the common masses. See, for instance, *Morountodun and Other Plays*.
3. In many parts of Nigeria, especially the part this researcher comes from, the mermaid is regarded as a bad spirit, and children are often told to keep away from rivers and streams for fear of being taken away by the mermaid. This is even demonstrated in Okome's poetry.
4. Maik Nwosu hails from the eastern part of Nigeria. He took his BA English from University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he was actively involved in the literary activities on campus. After taking his MA at University of Benin, Benin, he went into journalism and rose to be the Executive Editor of *The Source* magazine. He moved to the United States for a PhD at Syracuse University, New York. He is an Assistant Professor at University of Denver, Colorado.
5. In an interview, Nwosu further explains the influence of mythology on his poetry thus:

'I got into poetry in part because of my mother's stories about the River Niger and its Onitsha-Ogbaru axis, stories with the sort of numinous aura and semiotic power that helped make a poet out of me. Those stories traced a path for me back to my experience of the night masquerade as a child and my fascination with the poetics of the masquerade cult. From there, my poetry branched out to the world' (*In Their Voices*, 26).

6. In the same interview, Nwosu speaks of his fascination, first as a child, with fables from the ancient Greece:

‘I went to a village school, a grammar school which I am very proud of because of the way it shaped me. Although the school library was nothing to sing about, it sufficed for me then. I used to spend the break in the library, and that was where I discovered *Aesop’s Fables*. I was fascinated by those tales, and my first attempt at writing was a story in that tradition in response to a fable that I thought should have progressed or ended differently’ (*In Their Voices*, 24).

7. The Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera is famous for characterising himself as a writer that transcends national or continental mapping, whose influences come from anywhere in the world. See Flora Viet-Wild (362–366).
8. In his novel *Invisible Chapters*, Nwosu dramatises a collective struggle, including (though failed) mass action, to challenge the myth of power and the figure of military oppression.
9. Ashikodi (see *Invisible Chapters*) is a character/persona that occurs throughout Nwosu’s range of creative output. He is both a creative and insane person – and is generally Nwosu’s creation to dramatise the power of the Igbo god ‘Agwu’ (who gives creativity and madness, often in equal proportion to a man) over humanity.
10. In the work of Uche Nduka, one of the known voices of the military era poets, one can identify two phases in terms of thematics: the first is the question of nationhood seen in his poetry volumes such as *Flowers Child* and *Second Act*, which he published in Nigeria; and the second is concerned with the predicament, the excruciating nostalgia and the prevailing uncertainties of living in a country far away from one’s own seen in his other volumes such as *If Only the Night* and *Heart’s Field* which he published while living in exile. He is still outside Nigeria.
11. Nwosu explains the influence of the Christian religion on him thus: ‘Religion – Catholicism, especially – is something I was born into. But I grew up a different sort of ‘priest’ than the Catholic priest I had once dreamed of becoming’ (*In Their Voices*, 38).
12. As a journalist Maik Nwosu won the Nigerian Media Merit Award for the Journalist of the Year in 1995, and co-founded *The Source*, a weekly newsmagazine in 1997.
13. Onookome Okome hails from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. He studied at Ibadan where he was an active member of the Ibadan Poetry Club. He taught theatre and popular culture at University of Calabar before moving to Canada where he currently teaches African theatre and popular culture at University of Alberta.
14. Aridon is the god of creativity among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is the god to which the poet Tanure Ojaide associates himself.



6

Feminist Act: Feminising the Struggle Against the Oppressor

No, men are not the enemy. The enemy is the total societal structure which is a jungle of neo-colonial and feudalistic, even slave-holding structures and social attitudes [...]. As women's liberation is but an aspect of the need to liberate the total society from dehumanization and the loss of fundamental human rights, it is the social system which must change. But men become enemies when they seek to retard, even block, these necessary historical changes for selfish interests in power.

— Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*

Introduction

In 1989, the scholar Obi Maduakor in his contribution to the book *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective* opines that '[it] is in the area of poetry that the Nigerian female writers are still trailing languidly behind the menfolk on the literary scene' (75) – notice what some may see as an anti-feministic undertone suggested by the adverb 'languidly'. But in 2008 the Ibadan-based scholar Aderemi Raji-Oyelade published 'Notes toward the Bibliography of Nigerian Women's Poetry (1985–2006)' in which he 'collated over 50 works that have been published in the past two decades by Nigerian women poets' (198). It is not the sheer progress of 'over fifty works' within just two decades that is the only point here, but also the intention of scholars such as Raji-Oyelade and others (Ismail Bala Garba, for example) to deflect what they see as a regime of male-dominated critical tradition that either turns a deaf ear to the voices of women or (as the undertone of Maduakor's words above suggests) condescends to include only a negligible number of female voices. In Raji-Oyelade's words, 'the increasing publication of poetry by women authors has not been met with commensurate critical study of the emergent works' (199). Similarly in his 'Women Poetry from Northern Nigeria: A Bibliographic

Note', Garba claims that 'women poets from Northern Nigeria suffer double-fold invisibility' (1). Factual as these claims by Raji-Oyelade and Garba are, they seem overstated as is the case with most feminist assertions in the context of poetry produced since the 1980s. Within the period we have mapped as the military era, poetry (indeed all genres of literature), not just women poetry, could be said to have suffered a dearth of critical attention.

But the question for us is not the rationale adduced by the bibliographers for their works, namely the male critics' refusal to give attention to women poetry; or even Raji-Oyelade's contention that the efforts of the female poets amount to 'the progressive symbolism of the erasures of silence and self-effacement' (198). The concern here, as this chapter hopes to demonstrate, is the recognition of the female poet's participation in the poetic discourse sub-category of the military era under the dominant Nigerian literary tradition. This participation explodes beyond what is narrowly perceived as the boundary of feminism or womanism in Nigeria: self-representation and the emancipation of the woman. The recent output of literary works by women in Nigeria, in all genres, calls for a re-mapping of what has hitherto been seen as feminism or womanism whose analytical locus has mainly been the literary efforts of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Zaynab Alkali, to name just three. It is feminism or womanism that mainly locates itself within the subjugation of woman at home and the woman's struggles to extricate herself from the socio-cultural restrictions that principally bind her to the whims and caprices of the man. Consequently, critical engagements from diverse, mainly female, scholars have revolved around the woman as a daughter, wife, and mother, in spite of what Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie terms 'Social Transformation Including Women in Africa' (to echo the epigraph); or in spite of the expansive scope Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi gives to Womanism (see Arndt, *African Women's Literature, Orature and Intertextuality*, 333). Adebayo Aduke, for instance, sees marriage as the ultimate root of the woman's problems: 'Marriage [...] is one continuous hellish nightmare. Its inhibitions and restrictions stultify women's self-realisation and it is not until these women do away with their marriages that they are able to fulfil their individual destinies' (45). In the same vein, Vicky Sylvester Molemodile in her study of Buchi Emecheta's work points out that in Africa 'a woman is not regarded as complete or worthy of respect outside the institution of marriage' (1). The point to be made here is that what one might call the first phase of feminism in Nigeria confines itself to the sphere of marriage, home, and kitchen; and the heroine emerges as that woman who can break out of matrimonial restrictions. In rhetoric after rhetoric that seems to be concerned about the fate of the woman in her home, one can discern the self-limiting subaltern discourse of this early phase of feminism, compounded, as it were, by the proliferation of sub-theories that claim to distinctively cater for the African woman: African Feminism, Womanism, Africana Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Snail Sense Feminism. It is not



in the scope of this chapter to delve into the arguments informing these theoretical thoughts.

With the works of the military era poets (as well as dramatists and novelists), the persona or heroine is no longer satisfied by merely extricating herself from the cultural constraints that confine her to not only home but the kitchen side of the home. To be free from the kitchen, to marry a man of one's choice, to have lovely children, and to be a satisfied mother are not enough. The heroine sets her gaze beyond this and realises, especially within the discourse of nationhood, that the nation entirely is itself a prison. The struggles of this emerging heroine then are not only for the emancipation of the woman but also of the entire society. Beyond being a satisfied, socially respected mother she is a professional and a socio-political activist. This is the heroine of the new, Nigerian female writers which I find dramatised in Akachi Adimora-Ezeibgo's *Children of the Eagle* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. The activistic dimension of Enitan and Grace Ameh in Atta's novel which puts them in the lead of the struggles to unseat military oppression, even the outbursts of *Mother of Prison*, speaks volumes of a woman's capacity to, beyond issues of matrimony, engage *serious* national issues. In this premise, Irene Danysh's claim that 'the woman writer will more often deal with personal transformation and the male with public or societal transformation' (169) is no longer tenable today. Some recent feminist studies on new Nigerian writing have identified the dimension that transcends the kitchen, concentrating on other struggles beyond those of matrimony (Orabueze, 85–102; Bryce, 49–67, 317–343; Arndt, 199–221; Uko, 82–93). Jane Bryce's "'Half and Half Children": Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel' is exemplary in representing this paradigm shift. Bryce contends that 'the feminine identity evident in earlier women's writing [...] [has] given way to a challenging reconfiguration of national realities' (49). She goes further to assert that 'taken together, these novels [by a new generation of female writers in Nigeria] embody the effects of forty years of failed democratic rule and military dictatorship, corruption, state violence [...]' (54). Her point is that the female voice has moved from that peripheral zone in which it is only concerned with the fate of the woman to the centre in which the voice takes the woman's fate as *one of* the issues to tackle. Thus, in another of her essays, Bryce correctly points out that '[for] an alternative vision, and other "possible types of relation" in the narrative of nationhood, we have to look to the new generation of women writing in Nigeria' ('He Said, She Said', 17).

The poetry written by women in the military era, it would be correctly guessed, mingles intimate women concerns with the larger concerns of the nation brutalised by successive military regimes. The poets consider the woman's fate as a point at which action must be launched against the all-pervasive presence of military oppression; and in this project they see themselves as part of a larger design to deploy poetic discourse in the cultural struggles of the 1980s and the 1990s. Indeed

the main concern in this chapter is, using the poetry of Toyin Adewale and Unoma Azuah, to demonstrate that the woman voice is an active component of the poetic discourse raised to counter the supremacist discourse of the military in Nigeria.

Toyin Adewale: *In this Land we Love with Pain*

Toyin Adewale distinguishes herself, almost like Uche Nduka, as a literary stylist not hemmed in by the self-assertive poetics of the Alter-Native sub-tradition.¹ From the beginning, the anxiety of her poetry is to be different – in imagistic mode, in tonal modulation, in thematic thrust – from the existing poetry that is almost always strident with *familiar* metaphors about the plight of the common people in the society. Although her poetry is caught, inevitably, in the marketplace of influences in the relatively young Nigerian poetry, she succeeds considerably in shaping a distinct voice. Nduka and Adewale, at the start of their writing career, demonstrated a similar vision of a new generation, that is to say they exhibited a sense of pioneering a new voice of poetry in Nigerian literature. Adewale realised the dream of being a vital voice to the new generation by editing landmark anthologies such as *Breaking the Silence* (co-edited with Omowunmi Segun), *Short Stories by 16 Nigerian Women*, and *25 New Nigerian Poets* in whose introduction she attempts to stress the travails and triumphs of the new generation of poets. In a way, then, Adewale emerged in the 1990s as one of the most important female poets of her generation, considering herself an ambassador of that generation, especially in her travels and collaborations with writers within and outside Nigeria which resulted, for instance, in the publication of the aforementioned anthologies.

Adewale's poetry prefers to be *silently* penetrative, a quality shared by some other female poets of her time such as Unoma Azuah. Her poetry does not name names – it is not reductively invective; it does not shout, although it occasionally employs startling metaphors that appear aggressive to patriarchy. Her sense of outrage is modulated in measured images, involved litotes, characteristic brevity, and nuanced vision, but is deeply feminist. There is even a sense in which the individualism and the abandonment in her first volume, *Naked Testimonies*, seems to displace it from the community of volumes on the thematic time-space of her generation. The poems in *Naked Testimonies* have a tendency to be monologic, occasionally addressing a 'you', and less descriptive of the national realities of the 1990s. But this, as further scrutiny would show, is a kind of style whereby the singularity and individualism of the 'I' submerges the very political edge of the poetic vision. What is being driven at here is that the persona of each poem can be better understood if placed in the social context of the 1990s Nigeria, and all the clues for doing this are there in the poems.



Naked Testimonies is as much about *feminine* love as it is about the anguish of a society. It is in fact, given its privileging of selfhood, first about love, about the discovery of triumphal soul, about the desire to surpass the limitation of a male-centred world. Above all, it is about a nation, about Nigeria, and the signs of this exert themselves, sometimes, even without the poet being consciously aware of this. It is that characteristic angst, running through Adewale's poetry, which opens *Naked Testimonies*: the first poem 'For T.J.' is first a moan; then the wail of a persona caught both in the prison of love and that of a harsh society. In the persona's words:

And beyond this prison
I am a frozen ice cream
stubbornly awaiting you in the immense stadium
where love is sparkling like face cleanser
and fire,
passionate, consuming, melting the epiphanies of grief. (5–10)

What the persona calls 'the epiphanies of grief' is not really seen here, but runs through the poems in this volume, underscoring the rage that subtly informs some images in the entire collection. The other side of the volume is its joyous hilarity, as of a triumphal lover, having found her lover, exclaiming with the following words (in the poem 'Lemon Cream'):

Soon thereafter, peace will step in to our door
to an embrace possessed of silence
and we will merge, I the lemon, you the cream.
We shall be christened Lemon Cream
I ripen, ready and reaching. (10–14)

Such cases of triumph, of optimism, are mingled with those of disappointment that come from the deepest soul. This triumphal optimism, however, comes after a moment or period of agony.

While each poem in *Naked Testimonies* may have a certain, even if remote, connection with the historical events in Nigeria of the aforementioned period, there are some poems that openly historicise that period. One such poem is 'You Say Your Mouth Has No Blood?' – a question hurled at the perceived oppression-figure:

You say your mouth has no blood?

Three times I touched it

three times I touched blood

three times clotting and fresh

Who ate the

head in the freezer

the liver in the cooler

who stole in a heaving car?

See murdered dreams, your legacy,

How many pints swamp your blood bank

O cohort of vultures?

The head and the liver are of a human being murdered by this 'cohort of vultures'. The metaphor of the blood, which Adewale deploys here, is one that is all-pervading in the poetry of this era, as we have seen in the previous chapters; and when it is thus used, it is drawing attention to the oppressed nation. The focus here is twofold: first, the poem questions the violent destruction of human beings through organised, systematised, methods; second, it also questions the use of human parts by most African leaders for ritual purposes, as the popular case of Idi Amin Dada shows. The last question in the poem reveals, of course, that this is an ongoing situation that no one has done, or will do anything to stop it. The persona's courage to touch the mouth of the blood-sucker implies the generic nature of writers and artists to question established situations, especially those that are harmful to humanity.

The sequence 'Stream I', 'Stream II', and 'Stream III' vividly give the images of a torn woman. In 'Stream I' the picture is that of a woman, according to the poem, 'brimming with whys' (6). While she is powerless in the society, while she has nothing to eat, she remains a target of 'the venom of police guns' (7). In 'Stream II' the persona reaches the suffering woman with some comfort, having realised that 'her ache is a circumcised penis' (4), Adewale's way of referring to the patriarchal impositions on the Nigerian woman which often translate into a bare brutality. The persona seeks to help the woman out. With the use of the word 'mud' in the first line, we have the sense that the woman is being summoned out of slime, where she is possibly dumped by a man or her society. The last sequence clarifies our position as it engages us with such images as 'love' (1), 'breasting the narrow path in male pants' (6). The woman's problem is caused by man, by her love of a man, a man who possibly does not understand the depth of love; with such a man, or by loving



such a man, the woman inevitably knows that ‘the hibiscus can sprout thorns’ (2), a strong image that implies the phenomenon of unrequited love.

Adewale pursues this theme further in the sequence of poems entitled ‘Naked Testimonies I’, ‘Naked Testimonies II’, ‘Naked Testimonies III’, ‘Naked Testimonies IV’, and ‘Naked Testimonies V’. These five short poems take us into the mind of a female persona to see the tension between loving and hating, between the peace of one mind and the turbulence of two inter-coursing minds. In the first poem, the persona begins by telling her own story: ‘I tell a tale of sour tangarines / and shrivelled penises’ (1–2). This at once brings up the issues of patriarchy, one that Adewale has tackled all through her poetry. Here too, the persona has a tale about how her life is crushed by the male-dominated society. Adewale, as demonstrated in the second poem, is interested in creating a template, something like a meta-story about the existence of social stereotypes and inequality in the society. Some of the stereotypes, as shown by Adewale, are the subjection of women to what she calls ‘second-hand kisses’ (3), the confinement of women to ‘hearths’ (4), the demands by men of ‘sacrifice’ (6) from the women, and the expectations that women in ‘taverns’ (7) must give pleasure to men. The persona in this poem rebels against all these stereotypes, and in a weepy tone asks who will save her people from such a cruel social formation. The third poem focuses on divorce and broken homes, where the persona laments that ‘the wedding album is a funeral’ (6). Domestic violence comes through such images: ‘the swinging axe’ (2), ‘skirts and sweet potatoes suffer loss’ (4), ‘anger walks barefoot / in the fury of fallen stars’ (8–9). As a result of these, or in spite of these, the tone of the poem is that a woman does not build her ‘hut in a melon field’ (11), that is to say, it is better to be out of marriage than to be in it in a crumbling house or a structurally weak society. While in the fourth poem the persona has to go through the perceived social disgrace, especially in a society where a woman ought to endure all sorts of cruelties and remain with her husband, the fifth poem expresses the persona’s emphatic resolve to live her life:

The candles burns
without the razzmatazz
flames arouse the valleys
a shovel restores the walls
a voice is against the bull
like a mighty man
Pines are springing up in the wasteland
It is I
striding upon high places
Shield my voice
I walk in fire.

Even though the ‘razzmatazz’ of having a man around her is a thing of the past, there is a sense of triumph in this poem because the persona reclaims her life, takes her strides, and walks even ‘in fire’. The restoration of the walls is a metaphorical way of saying that she has taken her life out of the mess that she was thrown into.

Adewale’s second volume with the title in German *Die Aromaforscherin* is more openly concerned with national issues than the first. Here we do not encounter intensely personal issues, although the social space, as with most female writers in Nigeria, begins from the space of the woman. Perhaps the change of focus in this volume is first dramatised in the poem ‘Safari’ in which the poet has openly chosen to write a poem ‘dripping with fire and gutters’ (2). It is not that there are no other things to write about. Indeed, another voice, in the dialogic structure of the poem, queries: ‘don’t you / write about trees and constellations?’ This is taking a stand beyond *Naked Testimonies*; a stand that is unmistakable. The reason for her more committed stand here is couched in the paradox that aptly depicts the structural disorder in her society: ‘In this land we love with pain’ (5). To write about ‘trees’ and ‘constellations’ in such a place amounts to gross insensitivity on the side of the poet. One of the primary duties of a poet, as Adewale has come to imagine after *Naked Testimonies*, is to be sensitive, not only to the effectuation of her artistry, not only to the plight of the woman, but also to the fate of humanity in general. That the poem is written for and dedicated to Ogaga Ifowodo, a fellow Nigerian poet and pro-democracy activist who was imprisoned in the 1990s, points to the legitimisation of an opted poetic cause that collapses pure arts and social criticism into what has come to be the most veritable medium of poetic expression in Nigerian literature as dictated by the tradition. Romantic poetry, or a poetry about the personal ‘epiphanies of grief’, for instance, cannot take the place of political poetry because the poet resolves that ‘I cannot lie that the blood in / my mouth is



tomato sauce' (7–8). 'Safari' is a polyphonic poem with three voices in a dialogue: the poet's voice, the voice of the institution Adewale refers to as 'they' (2) who is wont to legislate the thematic choice for the poet, and the unheard voice of the addressee, who is Ifowodo. Metaphorised in the third stanza of the poem in 'Your book grieves on my table' (9) is the unheard voice of Ifowodo the poet. Adewale possibly refers to Ifowodo's volume of poetry, *Homeland and Other Poems*. While Ifowodo grieves in prison, the poet and whoever is (are) her companion(s) as shown in the pronoun, 'our', is also a reference to her generation that grieves in their land where to love is a painful act.

The short poem 'Reposeless' paints a gloomier situation of the society. The persona identifies with the downtrodden, the unfortunate ones, and deploys images from nature to manifest the hardship under which they find themselves. Such images as 'There are clouds so dense / they defy the sun' (3–4) does not only present the bleak atmosphere threatening human vision, but also indicates the near incurable pessimism that the land is thrown into. Once the sun does not shine, the day is unmade. The poem uses clouds, natural harbinger of rain that should be some sort of relief to the hardship of survival, as a symbol of anti-progressive machineries. Whatever the choice of Adewale's metaphor here, the poem brings to our knowledge the fact that natural elements can be against each other to the detriment of human beings. The line, 'Burdens. Clouds.', a syntactic compact of a one-word sentence, is Adewale's creative style of meaning that the problems human beings face are compacted in the hideous clouds that baulk the sun from shining on the land. To this extent, a reading of this poem begins from the assumption that the people are helpless about the cruelty exerted on them by powers superhuman and beyond their contrivance. The lamentation that,

We thirst and we thirst.

No water melon can

Quash our drought. (7–9)

confirms the helplessness of the people whose sun has ominously been clouded. But the last stanza of the poem has an undertone that questions the paraplegia of the people. This undertone though has to be sifted from the seeming overtone of helpless questions about the salvation the people need. The persona asks: 'And where is the shower / When we are soaked in faeces (12–13). This question is directed to the self. It is a serious query to a lethargic selfhood that cannot grope for a way out of a pall caused by the violence the clouds have done to the sun. Deconstructed, this question would mean: where is the messiah that would lead us out of this mess? This is a dead-end question that offers no solution to the people's problem other than to connect their inertia to a collective psychic failure. This is

why the ending of the poem is a pessimism that indicts the helpless people of being unable to pave their way out of the mess in which they find themselves:

Coasting on the lagoon,
murky ripples ensnare our rest.
Fleeing, we seek a home by the
Sidewalks in sagging shanties. (15–18)

The last line above is a sorry depiction of people incapable of walking out of their doom. Although Adewale avoids words or metaphors that give insight into those responsible for the terrible situation of the people apart from the dense clouds, a conjecture that military despotism (as we have seen in the previous poem) is behind this appalling atmosphere is valid.

In ‘A Prayer I’, we encounter a persona apparently incapacitated as a result of the woe that has befallen her. Humbled to the nadir of hope in life, she seeks help from an authority that appears not to be willing or be able to raise her from her pitiable position in the society. The first stanza of the poem shows that the persona has been struggling to survive by herself:

I have leaned on games
as if on sturdy pillars.
I have embraced a stone,
hearkening to a voice that lied in the
morning of dreams and fertile faith. (1–5)

Her struggle is obviously heading to futility. The content of the first two lines at once reveal her serious, but futile efforts. Instead of the situation stabilising for her good, it is dwindling and becoming worst for her. More cogent in the poem’s realisation of an unbearable hardship is the woman losing her grip on reality, manifested in the manner she embraces ‘a stone’. These are strong lines with which Adewale succeeds in portraying with her vivid metaphors, the abandonment and defencelessness of a woman obviously deceived by someone in whom she has some trust. It is not that the woman has not seen riches before. She may have actually lost her riches to the deception of the lying voice in the first stanza. She has exposed herself to the condition under which she lives. The prayer to survive this terrible situation seems directed to providence. The two last lines of the poem capture this: ‘behold my orchard, send deep rain. / Answer my hunger. Answer my thirst.’ That the persona has an orchard means that she is still toiling. She is after all not sitting down, cross-legged and waiting for help to come from somewhere. The



overall tone of the poem suggests that she has a strong personality. The possibility is there – and we can be optimistic here unlike in the previous poem – that she will get out of the games she earlier thought would lead her forward in life.

We see the woman at work in ‘A Prayer II’, a sequel to ‘A Prayer I.’ Her dedication to the work is total:

Loaded with scruffy jars,
I slough my sandals before this road
not of my choosing.
At this end of myself, I confess
that my coats were stolen.
I know nothing of relaxed legs
I have no divan. (1–7)

Her threnodic tone digresses to the confessional here. She is working because she has to make up for something she has lost which may have been as a result of her flaw. Her confessional tone prefaces her resolution to move away from the situation in which she finds herself at the moment. This is why she works very hard (‘I know nothing of relaxed legs’) since rebuilding a hope is a task that cannot be toyed with. Although her tone is triumphal in the poem, it is clear that she has become ‘a woman you cannot / feed with bread alone’. Adewale may have thematised the irresponsibility of a man towards a woman either in love affair or in matrimony here. This claim is grossly supported by the trust the woman reposes in the man, the lying ‘voice’ and the ‘you’ of this poem. By extension, however, this is also the kind of disappointment that a patriot, an artist, a poet, receives from a land that offers her hardship in spite of the efforts she has made to build it, as we earlier encountered in Afam’s poetry. Indeed Adewale’s depiction of the female figure here amounts to what Chris J.C. Wasike calls the feminisation of a nation. In his study of John Ruganda’s dramas, Wasike contends that Ruganda’s use of female characters, or feminist perspective, to grapple with socio-political realities during the dictatorship of Idi Amin in Uganda results in an engagement with the nation through feminism. His reading thus portrays how female ‘bodies can be read as canvasses that intersect between the semiotic and material dimensions of gender power and the imagination of the nation’ (2). To identify this intersection in Adewale’s poetry is to see the woman of ‘Prayer I’ and ‘Prayer II’ as not only exhibiting the qualities of the nation in which she lives, but as *being* herself the nation. This leads us to the myth or discourse of the nation as a woman, a discourse that some feminists have contested (Poon, 119; Nair, 118).

But whether Adewale's female characters allegorise the nation or they are women implicated in the social-political realities of the 1990s Nigeria, their lamentation is not only for their subjugated subjectivity, but also for the symbolic death of the nation in which they live. We encounter more of this persona in 'Explorer of Aromas', a poem written in numerous two-lined stanzas. She comes through as a victim of the parallel relationship existing between the poor and the rich in her society. The poem opens with a simile that places the vehicle in front of the tenor:

As the fire devours the grass,
as flames consume the matchsticks,

the street swallows my steps,
my voice dissolves in soil. (1-4)

Fire 'devours' grass voraciously just the same way that a flame consumes a matchstick. The poem's choice in using this imagery to direct attention to the tension between a person and her society in a way calls for the re-examination of a society's obligation to its citizenry. This is tenable because the persona's problem is essentially that of hunger. She is not asking for anything other than food; she is not setting her eyes on the human pleasures and social protection that her society ought to offer her; she is not asking to join the elite in their pursuit of power because she knows that she belongs to a society where the relationship between the rich and the poor, as the last lines of the poem show, is inherently, incurably dichotomous. Unlike the woman of 'A Prayer I' and 'A Prayer II', this persona has worked and has also walked to places for the sake of survival which does not yield any good result for her so that she is ultimately compelled to scavenge for food in the refuse cans of the rich people. For the persona to say that 'I have dined on dried dogs, / flavoured with acrid urine' (9-10) signifies that she has dwindled beyond sanity insofar as she has to keep herself alive.

Adewale's poems, especially the ones discussed here, jar human consciousness to reality through startling images; images that, as in Lola Shoneyin's poetry, boldly confront social convention.² The images are fundamentally linked to the discourse sub-category of her generation. Interesting as it is, the poems give us two types of persona: the persona who speaks, in fact *acts*, on behalf of the downtrodden woman; and the persona who is herself the downtrodden woman, who occupies the position of victimhood. With these two personas, interwoven in a way, Adewale's poems constitute a vital site for interrogating, first, the institution of maleness and, second, the oppressive establishment against which most, if not all, poets of Adewale's generation have had to institute a counter-discourse. The contention here, of course, is that through the personas Adewale achieves her own peculiar discourse in this



arena of subversive discourse. But most importantly, as the title of this chapter indicates, the poems lament the pain of the land, a pain caused by a male figure or male system, which is better viewed through the perception of the woman.

Unoma Azuah: *I will Defy the Rage of the Rain and Erode No More*

From Nsukka where she studied, to Lagos where she worked, and to Ibadan where she kept a fraternity with other budding poets like her, Unoma Azuah, as demonstrated in her poetry, perceived the tension in Nigeria of the 1990s through her personal tension orchestrated in a soul defiant to political, social, cultural, most importantly, patriarchal conventions.³ Sometimes her voice, subtly hysterical, comes through her personas as a lone voice demanding her individual space in a society that emphasises communality, drawing a sympathetic attention to herself, but at the same time asserting her will to surpass the limitations of cultural institutions even if no one comes to her rescue. Also, but indirectly, her voice locates itself in that mega-voice of an epoch that constitutes the political struggle against the institution of military in Nigeria. Her style is sometimes as Toyin Adewale's, subtle, less vociferous, but no doubt penetrative. In a way, her voice seems more determined, resolute, single-minded than Adewale's, and this is not in matters of aesthetics but of thematic permeation. While Adewale's poetry, for instance, can, no matter how subtle, call attention to itself through aesthetic appeal, Azuah's poetry, also aesthetically appealing of course, prefers to call attention to itself through thematic engagement. The difference here is simply a matter of degree. It is also to emphasise that Azuah's poetry seems to emanate from a more uncomfortable zone of imagination. Or that Azuah's poetic inspiration is hinged on that juncture of life where the individual is caught between internal and external pressures, and is wont to utter a cry of vexation.

But, as the suggestive title of her second, unpublished collection of poems (*Home is where the Heart Hurts*) intimates, the personal agony of her personas is inextricably linked to the social anguish of the Nigerian society – the result of the blatant militarisation of Nigeria. The night of Azuah's title for her first collection, *Night Songs*, is not only that of the female individual during which, like the personas of the poems, she had poured out her agony for being a woman, a Nigerian, and by implication a brutalised soul amidst male-centred conventions; but it is also the night of a nation at the perilous time of misrule that so shatteringly devastated the poor, the civilian, the artists and the intellectuals. Like Oguibe, Ifowodo, and Nduka, Azuah, if we conceive her as the poet-persona, sought another space outside Nigeria. She emigrated to the United States in search of daylight because the night

in Nigeria, whose songs she kept singing, would not end. The paradox of ‘home is where the heart hurts’ is central to the phenomenon of exile among these poets, poets that sought both in word and in action to rescue their nation from what Nesther Alu calls ‘the viperous hands’ of military oppressors (198).

Night Songs thus contains elegiac images that depict the plunder of a land as well as the rape of selfhood. The poem ‘Changes’ is unmistakable about this. In its brevity it attempts to capture the gamut of the *nightlong* catastrophe, ironically dubbed ‘changes’, which befall the land:

The dew of dawn cursed
the wrinkled face of the earth
In a dance of withering folds
leaves of the earth fry in fading colours
In strategic stances, grasses
sharpen their edges
Awaiting oppressive footsteps
Clumpy with dust
Clumpy with mud
Clumpy with heat
In a dance of withering folds
All things in knitted pain remold.

What Azuah calls the ‘dew of dawn’ is the change that comes quite frequently with another oppressive regime being enthroned. This of course is coup d’etat, that mode of power usurpation that each military man understood so well in the Nigeria of the 1980s and the 1990s. This ‘dew of dawn’ brings nothing other than curse to ‘the wrinkled face of the earth’, Azuah’s metaphorical way of referring to what Ousmane Sembene so famously referred to as ‘God’s bits of wood’. To invoke the metaphor of the earth here is to call attention to the pervasive effect of this kind of oppression in Nigeria. The images of destruction, of waste, and of infertility echoed in the words ‘dust’, ‘mud’, and ‘heat’ dramatise the damage that comes with each ‘dew of dawn’, that is to say, each martial song and each military incursion that Nigeria has to witness. The result, inevitably, is that ‘All things in knitted pain remold’. This bluntly ushers us into the police state in which the poet lived during the oppressive regimes of those decades. But this poem says nothing of the persona’s courage or resilience to challenge the establishment, as we have earlier claimed of Azuah’s poetry. That is because the interest of the poet here is



first to give us a picture of the condition of the country, a country in which she lives, in which, to use her engaging metaphor again, she is in fact among the ‘wrinkled face of the earth’.

One of the poems in which the poet-persona faces the plague of her society is ‘Kogi State NYSC Camp ‘94’.⁴ The poem is a blunt and resolute expression:

I fear you not soldier man
with all your roar on hot parade grounds
you lap like a dog for the laps of lust
I fear you not soldier man
with all your military tact
You are a mere ant
at every woman’s disposal to be squashed
I fear you not soldier man
with all your titles – AFRCN, NNPC, NTA, MC
You are a trained beast
Good only to die on battle grounds.

The paradox in this poem reverberates through every image, is the paradox of Nigeria, and possibly of Africa – that the persona hates her nation’s soldiers, in other words the armed forces of the nation, to the extent of wishing the soldier death, even if on the battle ground. More so, that the nation’s army, trained to protect the territorial integrity of the nation is, in fact, ‘a trained beast’; that what the persona can associate the soldier with, of all things, is ‘the laps of lust’; that the persona instead of regarding the soldier as a national hero, as all soldiers would prefer to be regarded, sees the soldier as an ‘ant’, one way of referring to a person as being cowardly. These paradoxes, for anyone who knows Nigeria, are tied up with the realities of Nigeria in the decades of military oppression. Successive military regimes in Nigeria instituted the superiority of the Nigerian army not with any act of heroism but through despicable acts such as rapacity and rape (in the literal and literary sense of the word). The result is that military men, whether the officers or the rank and file, became society’s villains. This poem challenges this institution and as a point of idiom uses, the military men deployed to train Nigerian youths during the camp of the NYSC. This poem transcends the event of the NYSC camp, and disparages the entire scope of military machinery in Nigeria.

It does seem that, following our historicist reading of the poem, the AFRCN of the poem would refer to the Armed Forces Ruling Council of Nigeria, the defunct mafia-like machine of military oppression in Nigeria. The NNPC of the

poem would refer to Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, the national organ concerned with managing the oil wealth of Nigeria, an organ that has served to enrich every succeeding military despot. The NTA of the poem would refer to the Nigeria Television Authority, which had served as an effective propaganda organ for the military oppressors in Nigeria. The acronyms can therefore, if deconstructed in the way we have done, serve as codes that open up the extra-textual engagement of the poem with the political issues of Nigeria at the time Azuah composed the poem. And what this throws up for us, as crucial as it is in Azuah's poetic project, is the intrepidity of the poet, like her contemporaries, in standing up to the police state in which they all had to live, and had to endure. No doubt, as Adeola James asserts, the '[women] writers have been no less concerned than men to articulate and denounce the poverty, corruption and destructive practices that have impeded development in Africa' (4). But a courageous rebuff, even dismissal, of soldiers or the entire military and paramilitary exertions such as this does not end the crises seething the society. If the soldiers got round to reading this kind of poem at all – notice the accessibility of the imagery and the obvious social semiotics so that the soldiers might understand the poem – they responded with tougher hostility, a situation that led poets such as Azuah herself to emigrate from Nigeria in order to survive.

It is therefore no wonder that with that bravado about dismissing a soldier as 'a mere ant', we encounter poems in which the personas express helplessness and hopelessness either in the face of a cruel social system or in that of an established patriarchal subjugation. The persona's voice is thus that of a subdued soul in 'Thunderbolts':

They came clapping down in jolts
 Locking our senses with giant bolts
 A power over-coming surged into our eyes reddened
 numbing our ears, swollen and deadened
 Subdued we knelt and fell
 But how can we later tell
 That we worshipped the god of violence
 We did, in awesome silence
 The arms of rebellion crushed
 The will of our lives lashed
 We gave in to the thunderbolts
 Becoming the slaves of violence.



The soul, spirit, and physique of rebellion, even the art, such as the previously discussed poem of rebellion, get crushed under the increasing power of despotism. This is pure power, the synonym of the will to, and the monopoly of, violence. It surpasses and crushes the power of rebellion, what the poet calls 'the arms of rebellion', only because it monopolises violence, and deploys all machineries under it for the effectuation of violence. The very duty of every dictatorship, at least from what we can historically gather about the Nigerian situation, is to guard itself, in the most aggressive manner, against even the slightest form of opposition. With such dictatorship, such as the dreaded dictatorship of Abacha in Nigeria, all kinds of artistic or cultural struggles are decimated. The image given to us with the following words is telling: 'Locking our senses with giant bolts'; it draws our attention to the mechanism of destruction that every dictator institutes against artists, writers, cultural activists, and intellectuals. These are of course the perceived and sometimes feared detractors of any despots. So, even before they reach the 'arms of rebellion' to crush it, the dictator and his cohorts have to imprison, as it were, the exuberant thinking faculties of this select people gifted with the use of words and images to confront lies and illegal regimes. Now notice that the persona includes herself among those whose senses are locked with 'giant bolts'. This is natural because, given what we have seen in the previous poem, the persona has been operating as the military oppressor's detractor, calling them soldiers ants. It is one duty that the persona owes the society and would have continued in discharging it, but, as this poem makes explicitly clear, the persona and her fellow strugglers are hamstrung, contained, and reduced to 'slaves of violence'. Soyinka in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* sees the same situation, historicised by Azuah here as one in which '[a] monster had reduced us, collectively, to a plantation of slaves, and the word 'liberation' could not be restricted to being a mere rhetorical device' (428). It is however troubling when the persona in Azuah's poem says, 'But how can we later tell / That we worshipped the god of violence'. Herein lay the determination to continue to speak in spite of the thunderbolts that now ruin their rebellious spirits. In other words, the poem's contention is that a poem should not succumb to silence. Here, too, the fear is expressed that any act of succumbing will only incur the Soyinkan charge that the man dies in him who keeps silence in the face of tyranny.⁵ In spite of the will not to face such a charge, however, the persona is pessimistic: 'We gave in to the thunderbolts'.

There is something of sarcasm in that pessimism, probably to enhance the point implicit in the poem that not all those who have the cultural power to confront the oppressor have stood up to the fight (in which case the Soyinkan charge applies). And so removed from the group, where an 'I' takes charge over a 'we', we encounter a poet-persona that is still deviant in her resolve to challenge, to confront, and to engage. We encounter her in 'Forbidden', a poem that seems quite individualistic, dramatising the grief of a person, not of a nation. There is in fact no other poem

as this where Azuah so assertively deploys the first person pronoun ‘I’ and its possessive form, ‘my’, to foreground the chaining of the individual spirit. Perhaps this will be better grasped if we hazard an explanation of what the title ‘Forbidden’ suggests: that the persona, obviously of the female sex, is forbidden to do a certain thing, or to have the freedom to live her life the way she chooses. In line with this, the entire poem can then be deciphered as the persona’s outrage against that restriction whose degree of intensity is captured in the word ‘forbidden’. Elsewhere in the poem, the word ‘taboo’ is used to emphasise the idea of being forbidden. But it is not just that the persona is forbidden from perhaps what she enjoys doing; she is compelled, molested, even assaulted, as the following lines show:

My hair is a palm tree
Where birds build their nests
Hatch their eggs and fly
I droop, heavy with their excreta

My head is a mortar
Where you pound pain
And gaze into my hollow

My face is a landscape
festered with uprooted trees
Where owls hoot their dirges. (1–10)

The very first feeling we have towards this persona is, undeniably, that of pity, also that of empathy. We are yet to know why she suffers these acts of violence, and in fact the poet does not mention it anywhere in the poem; but whatever is her sin it does seem from her tone that she is bearing a burden that is too heavy for her. One of the ways to plump the polyvalent image of the birds is to consider the wandering, seasonal nature of birds, which in our understanding of this poem, translates to the instability of those bird-like beings that come upon the persona by way of taking advantage of her. This is strengthened by the persona’s lament that ‘I droop, heavy with their excreta’. These bird-like creatures, that come and go, creating a burden for the persona, may either be of the male sex (such as men mistreating the female persona), of male-centred convention, in the case of individual agony, or of oppressive military regimes, such as the going and coming of military dictators who create burdens for the society – this reading of course conceives of the persona as the feminised nation. The second stanza above is not merely to accentuate



the condition of bearing the burden that the persona is condemned to, but also to introduce the angle of violence, of being hurt, of feeling the pain. Notice now that the poet here introduces a 'you', a 'you' representing the oppressor-figure. To 'pound pain' down the head of the persona is a self-explanatory metaphor that underscores, once again, the degree of cruelty against those in the society who Azuah earlier on referred to as 'slaves of violence'. The interesting thing, however, about this poem, which further reiterates our point about the resistant spirit of the military era poets as a collective, is expressed in the following lines:

Burn me in your gathered fire
I will not become a liar

Grind me on your largest slab
I remain, a taboo

My legs are a pair of windy paths
leading to a gully
I will defy the rage of the rain
And erode no more. (14–21)

This bold, defiant, rebellious, and *poetically treacherous* spirit cancels any perceived timidity which might be considered a reason for her being subdued under the burdens we have seen above. In a sense, then, the persona is not weak, but is only over-powered, and the note of optimism implicit here suggests that she foresees her freedom. For the idea of '[eroding] no more' is that of revolutionary resolve, gainful doggedness, and futuristic tenacity. Again our approach to this dynamic poem with multiple meaning images is to pin it down to the dual essences of individualistic and social imaginations – with the perception, of course, that one naturally leads to the other. Our interpretative conclusion, then, will, on the one hand, assert the determination of the persona, as a female individual, to free herself from the cultural strangulations in which she is caught; and, on the other hand, contend that the persona, *de-metaphorised* as a nation, indeed the poet's Nigeria, insists on continuously existing as a nation in spite of its deep plundering wound, and numerous incidents, such as the purposeful cancellation of the 12 June general elections in 1993, by the military regimes. Whether we see the persona as a woman or a nation, the move clearly is to confront patriarchy which is invariably state power, for, as Patricia Alden points out, 'patriarchy is a key variation of African dictatorship and indeed the fundamental ground upon which it flourishes' (quoted in Wasike, 5).

Akin to the poem above is 'Vows', a poem that, as its title implies, thematises that unrelenting resolve to invent a world of oneself in a society infernally deep in contradictions; among a people that look upon the persona as a bearer of burdens created by mores. In each of the poems we have discussed so far, Azuah makes it clear that the poet-persona has already been subjected to a rather prolonged, extensive, subjugation, and is now taking a determined step of rebellion against those responsible for oppressing the land. This poem relates that the persona has taken 'Circles of vows' (5), that is to say, she has repeatedly taken the vow that in spite of the demand from her society to remain that hollow creature whose life has to be determined by certain social precepts and exigencies she will seek her vision and realise her dream. The central idea here is that of matrimony captured in the image of the wedding ring. The persona, with 'circles of [...] many rings' (13), a representation of broken marriages, makes her vow to pursue the brighter side of life, and, most importantly, she is not afraid to face another failure, since life has become, against her expectations, a circle of failures. Words and phrases such as 'cobwebs' (2), 'broken and re-broken' (4), 'shattered vases' (8), 'limitations' (11), 'dislocated' (12), and 'dust of losses' (14) all point up the shakiness, and the eventual collapse of a pact between two persons, or between a person and her society.

In other poems such as 'Nsukka' and 'Lekki Bitch' the poet-persona temporarily takes us to scenic environments and from there raises her implacable voice of elegy against the waste both of her selfhood and of her land. Here she bewails, with a sense of nostalgia, the absence of what used to constitute good life. 'Nsukka' laments the decline of culture and the bastardisation of the pristine life in the rural areas of Nigeria during the oppressive regimes. The persona visits a place she considers her homeland; a place whose atmosphere and splendour are typical of a traditional home:

A green carpet runs through the hillocks of my childhood
Where drum beats are locked away
I wriggle at the edges
Charged with the rhythm of my naval cord. (1–4)

The image of green grass on the land bespeaks of the natural resources that her place is endowed with. The persona is raised in the richness of the land's culture and through her exhilarating tone we infer that it is the best she has had. The tone of the next stanza contrasts sharply with this: 'But there are no more drums / No more gongs / And no more festivals' (5–7). Here is the tone of sadness and disappointment, almost that of bereavement. The 'drums,' the 'gongs' and the 'festivals' are symbolic of vivacity, vitality and continuity. In addition, they stamp



the persona's self-identity. That these elements of culture have eluded her is capable of evoking a dirge from the persona especially since she had experienced them before. Beyond the demise of drums and songs, the community is also bereft of its physical and natural endowment. The persona laments that:

Through paths of tendrils
Through windy dusty roads
I bump into half-clad children
Clapping their kegs for water
And there is none for my brown feet. (8–12)

The loss is from the artistic to the existential: now a total loss. The image here is that of the poverty and plight of the rural people, a culmination of the sin of neglect of the rural people and places committed by every government, whether military or civilian, since Nigeria's independence. 'Water' in this poem is symbolic of the basic necessities of life for the people. That they spend their time looking for it, not having any time for their songs and dances, depicts the intensity of their deprivation. Which is why the poem's pessimism is predicated on this conclusion: 'The laughter that once enriched these hills are gone / The water that once encircled these hills are gone' (19–20).

'Lekki Bitch' – notice the pun on Lekki Beach of Lagos State – concerns itself with the plight of a single person, a woman, better understood as a symbol of human indignity in a militarily oppressed Lagos. Lekki Beach, where this poem is set, is a popular beach in the coastal city of Lagos. The poem, in three short stanzas, simply gives us a picture of misery:

Her belly thunders, a huge bulge
baring her bowels to the sky
Such style; the song she strokes
Her tongue licks the shores, begging

She roars in folds of blue
Teasing breezes
How she froths when we ignore her
Pregnant, she dances
Her belly, damp, deep and dark
Her fullness, a dressed awe

She is a long tongued beach
 In depths, she lies in wait
 Like death she waits and lures.

This rendition of a wasted woman would ordinarily seem *apolitical*, especially as the poem does not bother to inform us of the cause of the woman's misery – but a contextualised reading of the poem reveals that behind this portrait is an indictment of a nation that forsakes her own, and condemns them to the precarious life of the Lagos beach. As evidently clear, the Lagos beach, in spite of its claim to touristic ventures, is a home, also a commercial arena, for imps, underdogs, social outcasts, and criminals. Really, the poem, despite its ironies, is not romanticising this woman of an unspecified age; rather the poem presents her as a kind of social threat: 'Like death she waits and lures'. But why is she a threat when she is just one of those numerous people on the Lagos beach, like Elvis of Chris Abani's novel *Graceland*, making music out of which they seek to earn some coins for survival? Is the simile 'Like death' not one of Azuah's ironic formations to draw attention to the consequences for the society of having such people populating the society, the beach whose state function, among others, is to *embrace* tourists? It does seem that the persona of this poem, regardless of her 'belly' thundering, of her 'tongue' licking the shores, of her 'roars', is more sinned against than she sins. She is one of those made a beggar in her country because of the hardship which, from our historical explications so far, is caused by the ruthless military regimes that misruled the country. The persona, like this poem pregnant with meanings, is carrying a pregnancy. Her belly is a 'huge bulge', it is 'damp, deep and dark', and is one of the factors responsible for her awkward dressing. Pregnancies ought, of course, to result in birth, but the poem gives us the picture of death instead – this ambivalence is telling in that, beyond underscoring the contradiction in the persona's society, it brings to the fore the question of mortality both for the unborn child and for the restive mother. She is restive because she has to sing, to possibly strike a wonky guitar, to display (no matter how weak) dance steps, as a way of begging for something to eat. There is certainly no doubt that Azuah, in this poem as in other poems, intends to provoke our sympathy for this figure who has so long lived on the beach that she is, according to the poet, 'a long tongued beach'.

One other important thing to demonstrate about Azuah's poetry, besides her depiction of the state of socio-cultural restriction and damaging privation is the dimension of mythic spirituality. The impression poems such as 'Queen of the Night' and 'Onishe' give us is that the poet-persona, having struggled against the overwhelming odds and having understood the degree of her oddities chooses to take her condition to the supernatural. These two poems are *acts* of supplication



to the supernatural powers – queen of the night, in most Nigerian or African, cosmologies would be a goddess, one that may perhaps be associated with bad deeds, especially given the othering of the myths and religions of Africa by the colonial metropole. Onishe, as Azuah's footnote says, is the river goddess of the Asaba people of Nigeria. The persona thus takes her case to the goddess, asking for more strength to withstand weight of repressive forces. In 'Queen of the Night' the persona pleads with the goddess to enfold her, and give her rest. What she particularly needs are 'pills of pleasure' (2) that would alleviate her traumatic suffering. The persona foresees a situation whereby she will be so healed that she will scream with joy. But, interestingly, this, in her view, can only take place if the goddess runs her 'ropes' around her (the persona), and here we encounter ropes that do not bind one. Or if the ropes bind the persona; the binding is, as is shown here, most welcome because it gives her respite from the restless life she has been living. And, with supplication also comes eulogy. The poem 'Onishe' is only different in degree. Here, the persona offers herself totally as a sacrifice to the goddess, and with that tone of burden that she is tired of living a life that does not offer happiness. What is quite interesting in this poem is Azuah's use of appropriate images that clearly depict the phenomenon of sacrifice; the images are appropriate because they are literally words for those objects that are used in traditional Asaba society for making a sacrifice to the goddess. The entire picture then is that of the goddess Onishe sitting in her shrine, before her we see the offered white eggs, the blood of the slaughtered animal, the cooked or peeled or sliced yam 'ringed with cowries' (5), all inside the totem-bearing calabash. The persona sees herself as the eggs, the blood, and the yam, even as the voice of the worshipping priest(ess). This is nothing other than total surrender, and we can conclude that here, finally, is where the persona whose soul has been raging with agony would find rest.

It is thus to rage against restriction and turbulent atmosphere, and to seek freedom and rest, that Azuah's poems present themselves as part of the discursive formation of an antagonistic thesis with a specific historicity spanning the military regimes of the 1990s. Like the poems of Adewale, Azuah's poems have as their forte of discourse the feminist standpoint. But very vivid in their poetry is the struggle and anguish of the nation, which proves that, beyond personal issues, 'the dynamics of power in African societies is a major preoccupation expressed in African women's writing today' (Burango, 67). In any case the very personal problems, such as the question of gender and sexuality, of the woman are not absent in their poetry; they in fact come first and are often allegories of the fate of the nation.

Notes

1. Toyin Adewale-Gabriel studied at the University of Ibadan. She has anchored literary pages for the newspapers *The Guardian*, *Post Express*, and *Daily Times*. She lives and works in Abuja.
2. See Lola Shoneyin's *So All the Time I was Sitting on an Egg*.
3. Unoma Azuah was born at Ogwashi-Ukwu in Delta State to a Tiv father and an Igbo mother. She studied at the University of Nsukka where she edited the campus literary magazine, *The Muse*. She lives and works in the United States.
4. The poet Azuah probably composed this poem during or in remembrance of her participation in the National Youth Service Corp, a compulsory, one year national service for fresh tertiary school graduates in Nigeria. Kogi State is one of the federating states in Nigeria, and the time of the camp was probably in 1994.
5. Soyinka's idea that the man dies in him who keeps silence in the face of tyranny is central to his prison memoir *The Man Died*.



Eco-Human Engagement: Facing the Oppressor over the Niger Delta

The flames of Shell are flames of hell.

— Ken Saro-Wiwa in Ken Wiwa, *In the Shadow of a Saint: A Son's Journey to Understand His Father's Legacy*.

The problem is not simply the 'selfhood' of the nation as opposed to otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population.

The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is *eternally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.

— Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Introduction

Emerging studies in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism have pointed out that the concern with nature or landscape in postcolonial writing is not – as certain views from the Euro-American establishment have suggested – a recent phenomenon. Indeed, nature (the environment, the elements, biodiversity) has always been a participant, not a mere observer, in the struggle to counter colonial discourses (DeLoughrey & Handley, 5–9). In continuing the commitment of diverse literary forms to expressing, for instance, the harsh conditions of life in Africa, the plight of the environment has not been ignored. Nigerian literature has demonstrated its anxiety, not only for Nigerians caught in the devastation of the polity by a cabal of political and military elite, but also for the nation's environments and landscapes brutalised by governmental and institutional anti-nature activities.

William Slaymaker in a survey essay, 'Natural Connections; Unnatural Identities: Ecocriticism in the Black Atlantic' also points out that although literature of nature has existed in Africa since the inception of modern writing, it is in the 1960s that studies, called ecocriticism, have emerged to critique the plight of the environment especially as a result of what he calls 'modernization, globalization of markets, urbanization and population growth' (129). Slaymaker further points out interestingly that 'Nigerian literature is a treasure trove for the ecocritical and literary environmentalist' (130). A cursory look at Nigerian literature would confirm Slaymaker's claim; the concern with nature has been most vigorously expressed in the writing, especially poetry, of the writers in Nigeria who hail from the Niger Delta region.¹ Although it is arguably in the poetry of the military era that the question of environmentalism is most radically manifest, it has been there in diverse tenors within the Nigerian literary space. From Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* published in 1952, to Gabriel Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation* published in 1978, and Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* that appeared in 1986 or Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* published in 1986, to the poetry of emerging writers such as Uche Peter Umez's *Dark through the Delta* published in 2004 and Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth* which appeared in 2007, nature has continued to engage the attention of Nigerian poets. It is therefore valid that in Nigeria, as elsewhere, the question of environment and nature as represented in the '[n]otions of "space", "place", and "landscape"' (Bob et al., 22) has been a continuous concern.

The mode of these writers' preoccupation with nature, as this chapter attempts to demonstrate with the poetry of Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo, is evidently distinctive and may be differentiated from the manner in which writers from elsewhere concern themselves with nature and environment largely because of what Simon C. Estok calls 'varying cultural valencies' (85) in eco-writing. The idea of polyvalence in eco-writing as it relates to African literature is in fact the chief theme of Byron Caminero-Santangelo's 'Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature' in which he argues that the definition, mapping and inclusion of African writers' concern with the environment in what he calls 'ecocritical orthodoxy' outlined by Western epistemology must take account of the 'African environmental history and literary engagement' (699). The concern in this chapter is to demonstrate that the problems of the environment, for the military era poets, are entrenched in the larger crisis of leadership. The poets invariably operate within the larger domain of the literary tradition. The concern with nature is not a shift from the broadly political base of this tradition but an extension to encapsulate the earth on which the ordinary people live. Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, for instance, beyond critiquing the technologically driven devastation of the earth, is a strong political statement on behalf of those without a modern technology who rely on nature for both subsistence and for pleasure. Eco-writing in Nigerian literature can therefore be said to have emerged through this socialist realist perspective.



It emanates from a deep desire to foreground the people's condition in the face of tyranny: to institute a discourse attack on the hegemony of militarism which has held sway in Nigeria since independence. It is an eco-writing that demands a critical protocol which seeks social justice for both humans and non-humans. Social commitment, or what Caminero-Santangelo calls 'literary engagement', is therefore a given in Nigeria's environmental imagination.

For many Nigerian writers, the 'disruption of the landscape is tied to political corruption' (Slaymaker, 131). That is to say, the dialectic for these poets, is not the clash between humans and the environment; but more importantly it is a tripartite dimension that aligns the fate of the environment to the fate of the ordinary people, and pitches them against the ineptitude of the military dictator. It focuses tellingly on the class conflict between the perceived owners of the land and those who tap the wealth of the land. This anthropocentrism inherent in the eco-writing from the Niger Delta accounts for titling this chapter 'Eco-human engagement'. This obviously seems to diverge from eco-writing in other places where, according to Gerrard Greg, 'ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism' (176). Any engagement with eco-writing in Nigeria, especially the eco-poetry of the military era, would rather centre on the interface between the yearnings of the people under an inhuman authority and the fate of the environment exploited by the same authority. The connection between the fate of the people and that of the environment, it does appear, is the preoccupation of Graham Huggan and Helen Triffin's book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. While noting the 'seemingly insurmountable problems' (2) in fusing the concerns of the two fields Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism, they contend that 'what is probably most needed is not the capacity to think beyond the human [ie, jettisoning anthropocentrism], but the courage to imagine new ways in which human and non-human societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed' (215). The eco-writing of Nigeria, especially emanating from the Niger Delta region, has long mapped its course as one that encompasses 'human and non-human societies'.

The Niger Delta region over the years has, in the eyes of many, degenerated to a land of misery. According to political scientist, Okechukwu Ibeanu, the Nigerian Niger River Delta is one of the largest in the world and is characterised by a mesh of marshland, creeks, tributaries and lagoons. 'About one-third of this area is [a] fragile mangrove forest, the second largest mangrove forest in the world' (316). Since crude oil was discovered here in colonial Nigeria, the place has suffered from the crisis of survival. This two-pronged crisis is, on the one hand, about the survival of the dispossessed, alienated people of the Niger Delta region; and, on the other hand, about the degraded soil, the polluted waters, and the brutalised fauna and flora. Out of this dispossessed people and brutalised land comes great wealth that sustains what is seen as Nigeria's colossal cost of governance. At the

peak of oil production in the 1970s, Nigeria exported about two million barrels a day. Even today, Nigeria remains one of the largest producers of crude oil in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).² But a disturbing paradox makes nonsense of the riches Nigeria makes from the Niger Delta: it is claimed that the cradle of crude oil is one of the poorest areas in Nigeria. Illustrating this indigence with statistics in 2007, Ibeanu states that

[O]nly about 27% of people in the Delta have access to safe drinking water and about 30% of households have access to electricity, both of which are below the national averages of 31.7% and 33.6% respectively. There is [in spite of the degradation, the pollution] one doctor per 82 000 people in the Niger Delta, rising to 132 000 per doctor in some areas, which is more than three times the national average of 40 000 per doctor [...]. Education levels are below the national average and are particularly low for women. While 76% of Nigerian children attend primary school, this level drops to 30–40% in some parts of the Niger Delta. (320–321)

This deplorable condition, which has not changed considerably, gave rise to what we may call the first wave of activism led by the iconic Isaac Boro, and the martyred writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa. But even then Ken Saro-Wiwa articulated mostly the plight of the Ogoni people, one of the many ethnic groups from the Niger Delta.³ However, as Slaymaker (131) opines and as demonstrated in the book *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria* edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah, Saro-Wiwa's martyrdom instigated fresh eco-literary outbursts across Nigeria. Indeed, the killing of Saro-Wiwa and others across the Niger Delta region, and the gagging of voices that dared to speak, the brutalisation of the earth with total abandon during the military despotism of Sani Abacha, aroused writers such as Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide and other younger writers including Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo to evolve their interventionist vision which was focused mostly on the class dichotomy in the Niger Delta region.⁴

The issue for the military era eco-poets is the unbearable inequality in the society occasioned by the uneven distribution of the wealth from the Niger Delta region, and the carefree depletion of the land as a result of ecologically unwise activities which, as Bob and others point out, undermines agricultural production systems (27). The people of the Niger Delta region are mostly rural peasants engaging in farming and fishing. With the soils damaged, the waters polluted, the air invaded by permanent gas flaring, and the fauna and flora debased, the people become extremely vulnerable as Bassey and Ifowodo depict in their eco-poems. The people lose their space, their place, and their culture because there is an organic link between the people's culture and nature (Bob et al., 17). This condition beckons the poet to duty; Bassey and Ifowodo are among the poets of the military era who obey this call.



Nnimmo Bassey: *Of Burst Bellies and Pipes*

Before *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood*, Bassey had published two volumes of poetry namely *Patriots and Cockroaches* and *Intercepted*.⁵ In *Intercepted*, Bassey particularly produces an intense discourse of incarceration informed by his own experience of being arrested and thrown into jail during one of his trips out of the country for purposes of environmental activism. *Intercepted* foregrounds memory, but in potent figurations of silences, absences, emptiness, and an alienated selfhood. Bassey's memory of prison experience is thus fraught with fragmentation and disconnection. This results in the highly pessimistic character of his prison poems. The deliberate brevity of the poems, their lack or sparse use of punctuation marks, their tendency towards abstraction, and their dense metaphors, realise a resonance of a broken life caught between the simple things and the complex things of existence. The poem 'Hope', for instance, which begins the collection, negotiates a space between the simple and the complex, between pessimism and optimism, between life and death. It is a statement of fact about prison experience; it is also a statement of negation, of the present anguish, by a tortured soul. It depicts a situation of 'liberty bowed by boots' (3), of having 'vinegar down your throat' (6). Such metaphors and metonyms unveil the inhumanity, the immorality, the sheer brutality of silencing and denying human beings their freedom, especially in their own land. It is an indefinite imprisonment, as when pro-democracy activists were thrown into jail without trial and were forgotten during military dictatorship. The persona says 'Don't ask me when we'll be / Out' (9–10), and in this climate of uncertainty the only thing that keeps coming to the persona's mind, one of the signals that she still has life, is hope. It is one thing to be a free person and hope and it is another to be in prison and to hope. Hoping while in prison is a form of measuring one's condition, oneself, and building a bridge between oneself and the outside world.

We Thought It Was Oil takes the theme of oppression to the domain of ecology, only broadening the scope of the poetic vision Bassey has set for himself. The volume is programmatic: it contains poems written only about and during his travels across the world for, in his words, 'meetings with community groups and other environmentalists' (8). This affords the volume the capacity to extend its ecological concerns to other countries such as South Africa, Ecuador and Venezuela. But the most potent eco-poems in this volume establish Bassey's strong connection with the Niger Delta region of Nigeria; and his claim to intimate knowledge of what goes on there, his deep desire to be the voice of the voiceless; and his call to the people of the Niger Delta to rise against what he sees as a wicked national government.

Bassey's title poem 'We thought it was oil ... but it was blood' is evocative. It vividly captures the condition of the people, of the earth, in a simple tonal insistence and a rhythmic pattern realised in the refrain 'We thought it was oil / But

it was blood' (12–13). The poet identifies himself also as a victim, stretching the meaning of 'we' to encapsulate not just humans, but also the earth which hurts as well, and 'bleeds', from the anti-human and anti-ecological activities of an implied oppressor-figure. Characteristic of Bassey's poetry, the poem begins from a happy tone about the past, when things were good; and moves to hopelessness, and to a total police state. The poem recalls the time people 'danced in the street' (2), had joy in their 'hearts' (3), and thought they had freedom, especially one that came with the discovery of crude oil in the land. But it is quick to contrast that image to the reality of death in a way that even jars the reader. The reader is suddenly, in this climate of joy, told of people who collapse under the fires of the 'Red-hot guns' (11). In a single stanza the poem transports us from its idyllic past to its horrendous presence. The telling contrast between the street dance and the reigns of the guns will continue to dominate the poetic discourse we encounter.

The constant repetition of 'We thought it was oil / But it was blood' throughout the poem underpins the overall tone of the poem, and gives the theme its needed emphasis. Generally, the poem is threnodic. It pours like tears from a tortured soul or, to use the poem's metaphor, like blood from an injured person on an injured earth. The image of injury is the poem's, manifested in different forms; the injury, for the poem, is not only against flesh, but also against the earth. Earth enjoys personification throughout this poem. At the core of the poem's personification of the earth is the conflation of both the living and the non-living to achieve a unified object of oppression. Although the poem shies away from overtly depicting the oppressor, the structure of his threnody, and his metonymic constructions such as 'guns' (11), 'their Shells' (45; notice the capital S), and 'military shields' (46) point up the image of a soldier-oppressor. The context is unmistakable: the disturbing presence of the military in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria during, most especially, the Abacha junta in the 1990s. Soldiers were deployed to the area to deal ruthlessly with people considered insurgents, and to protect what was considered to be Nigeria's national wealth. This is made clearer when the poet says: 'First it was the Ogonis / Today it is Ijaws / Who will be slain this next day?' (28–30). This alludes to the killing of Saro-Wiwa and others. The other thing that also comes to mind is the massacre of the innocent villagers at Odi ordered by the then President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. The killing sport in the Niger Delta, as the question above denotes, is unending. Each Nigerian government considered it an important duty to quench any uprising or opposition that came from there, given its strategic importance to what was considered national wealth. The poem implicitly refers to Shell Corporation, the British oil giant explorer, when it says: 'We see their Shells / Behind military shields / Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs / Drilling our souls' (45–48). This is the poem's way of capturing the connivance between the military junta and the oil companies in oppressing the rural people of the Niger Delta region in the 1990s. The strength of this poem is in the strong images of abandonment,



hardship, oppression, frustration, death, and also that of hope. The poet is able to realise and connect in a sustained breath of lamentation. At one point, the persona talks of frustration and hopelessness:

We see open mouths
But hear no screams
Tears don't flow
When you are scarred
We stand in pools
Up to our knees. (31–36)

The synecdoche 'open mouths' that cannot scream because of utter fear captures, more than anything in the poem, the police state in which the people, in spite of the destruction of their soil, are perpetually condemned to. At another point, the persona is waxing optimistic, asserting that 'Their pipes may burst / But our dreams won't burst' (59–60). What is implied is a reversal of victimhood: the oil companies and the military junta will turn out to be the victims of burst pipes, which of course spells doom for their mercenary ventures. This is prophetic in the sense that today pipe bursting, often carried out by militants in the Niger Delta, is the bane of oil activities in the region. The persona's optimism for himself and his people is stretched here:

They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will RISE
We may die
And yet stay alive
Placed on the slab
Slaughtered by the day
We are the living
Long sacrificed. (65–74)

With the accent on 'RISE', the poem dramatises the hope of a people who will not give up no matter the degree of activities of the viperous and rapacious ruler. The image of blood here is strong. The double nature of this blood must be understood:

it is the blood that comes from the soil as oil as well as the blood that comes from the slain humans. It is therefore a symbol of waste, both human and ecological.

It is an anguished persona, with a set of raging metaphors, on behalf of the earth and its harassed inhabitants, who explodes through the poem 'The United Niger Delta Oil Co.', naming names, confronting the oppressor-figure. The quasi-dramatic poem is an allegorising one in which the story of the beginnings, of Adam and Eve, of Eve and the snake, of the snake and the forbidden fruit, is enacted to realise the loss of the Niger Delta's innocence as a land, a soil, an earth; and of the fatal crises that will haunt its people without end. The poem is blunt, metaphors give way to direct invectives, lengthy lines flowing like tears or like blood. It brings up the rhetoric of apocalypse, in doing so producing some memorable lines. Here too, blood finds a phenomenal level of symbolisation. Above all, the poem is one intense bout of crying from a persona who creates the scenario where all voices are decimated except his. The eponymous United Niger Delta Oil Co. in the poem comprises 'Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC / Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil and similar entities' (9–10), both home and foreign oil ventures, that, in the manner Europe scrambled for Africa, scramble for the small, but rich region of Nigeria. In this poem, the oil, the soil, the earth, are the bedevilled apples: of these apples, Eve is warned, 'If you take and if you eat of these fruits / You will see only day and no nights!' (7–8). This biblical knowledge of life, of pains and death, the poem equates with the gas perpetually flaring in the Niger Delta that practically erases the difference between day and night. With the permanent gas flaring, night resembles daylight. Once Eve knew of this life, once Nigeria knew of this rich crude oil, disaster sets in:

The United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated
 Opened its claws and rigs and climbed broad platforms
 Shared and divided the land and the sea
 Took the entire coasts of our country
 Loving best the heart beating in her waist: the delta
 They re-christened their property
 The savage land of the uncontacted
 The savage land of the blind
 The savage land of the powerless saboteurs. (12–20)

The poem fully unveils and really depicts the enemies of the earth and its people: they are the giant Euro-American oil companies in connivance with the home organ of government concerned with crude oil exploration, the Nigeria National



Petroleum Company (NNPC). Here, they seize the Niger Delta region, declare it and its people savage, and proceed to share it to the best of their interests. It does seem the poem is drawing our attention to the similarity, quite glaring, in this design and in the colonial design that rendered Africa savage and tore it apart in the interest of the colonial emperors. This is not an incidental parallel because the poet's explicit message running through the poem is the capturing, the subjugation, and the commodification or destructive industrialisation of a people's basic necessities such as the waters (on which they fish) and land (on which they farm). It is pertinent to point out here that this poem is not raising alarm about an imminent process, but it is describing what it sees as the stark realities on the ground in a tone that is both threnodic and enraged. Already the oil companies 'suck crude from the belly of the earth' (39) and 'pump blood into the belly of the earth' (41). Here then is the interconnectedness of crude oil, which gives the oppressors their wealth, which is the only thing they need from this earth; and of the blood, a representation of the cowed, brutalised people of the besieged land; and of the earth itself, now raped and forced to give wealth to a few, but forced to take the lives of many. This harrowing drama is central to Bassey's poetic jeremiad. The emphasis is that a people are facing total extinction, following the clean plundering of their land, because crude oil is found on their soil, because this crude oil is a means of immense wealth to some corrupt leaders and their allies.

The poem 'When the Earth Bleeds', also depicts the destructive nature of oil exploration. It approaches its subject from the angle of the earth. It reads like an elegy for the earth, focusing on the earth as a victim of the destructive activities of oil exploration. There is also a running couplet, a refrain, in this poem which propels the overall tone of the poem: '*The oil only flows / When the earth bleeds*' (6–7). Because the Nigerian government must get oil to keep the economy going, because foreign oil interests must be satisfied so the earth will continue to bleed, and those, especially the underprivileged, who engage in natural activities on the earth, must be left to perish. The plight of the earth here is also organically connected to the plight of the innocent people of the Niger Delta area. That is why the opening stanza presents this paradox:

I hear that oil
Makes things move
In reality check
Oil makes life stop. (1–4)

This, arguably, literarily, has become a fact for the rural poor in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, as this poem claims. If oil makes life move, a euphemistic way of saying if oil brings riches, the region would have been painted in gold because

the oil produced from there (at the time this poem was written) constituted about 80% of Nigeria's national income (see Ejibowah, 29–47). But the poem's angry metaphors fully unveil the negative side of oil exploration. We see the 'thousand explosions in the belly of the earth' (8), referring to the activities that blow up earth and rocks, destroying the surface on which the peasants carry out their farming activities. We see 'their gas flares' (17), referring to the disturbing reality that the Nigerian government, for several years, has been unable to curtail gas flaring. The poem also refers to the polluted waters of the Niger Delta as a result of oil exploration. It ultimately presents the earth's woes. And here too, the earth's woes are the people's woes. The persona is specific about the location of the bleeding earth; it is Ogoniland where the people 'can't even breathe' (25). Beyond the optimism earlier expressed, the poem calls the people to action. It lays out rhetorical questions to prick the conscience of complacent minds and to arouse weak souls. The call is forthright:

Arise people, Arise
Let's unite
With our fists
Let's bandage the earth. (33–36)

The call is to 'bandage' the bleeding earth, but it is also a call to mend the damaged self. If the people heed the poem's call and arise, they do so for their own benefit. They cannot afford to lose their earth, but more pertinently they cannot afford to lose their lives in the ongoing pollution of their lands and waters. The deep stirring that triggers this call is that the people, being denied free air to breathe, are already pushed to the wall and must now take action if they must live.

The militant metaphors of Bassey's poems underscore their participation in the discourse that purports to emancipate the Niger Delta under military oppression. Bassey's poems seem to render the urgency of action that the people must take; their lamentation ends in defiance and a call to militancy. The persona seems to blame not only the government, but the northern section of the country, from where the dictator hails, for being responsible for the exploitation of the people and the earth. In a sense, most of the poetry from and about the Niger Delta region expresses this blame, and poses fundamental questions for the unity of Nigeria as a nation. In his reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's poetry, for example, Oyeniyi Okunoye points out that the poet 'creates the impression that Northern Nigeria – which, until the amalgamation, was a separate political entity, is largely responsible for the woes of the [Niger Delta] region' (421). Okunoye goes on to reflect that,



The contemporaneous rendering of the Niger Delta in the past ten years ironically negates what used to be the attitude of the Niger Delta to the Nigerian project. [The people of the Niger Delta] had been serious defenders of the federal side during the Nigerian/Biafran war. The new trends in the poetry from the area will then represent a change of position dictated by expediency. (427)

The discourse of nationhood and of nationalism gives way to minority discourse, as implied in our epigraph above from Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha draws attention to the complex of heterogeneity and the interstices within, which often play to the fore when, and if, ethnic peoples interrogate the very foundation of *one* nation. But while poets like Bassey, Ikiriko and others find it convenient to stir a northern/southern dialectic, they seem to forget the heterogeneity of the Niger Delta region itself and the crisis of minority within minority that might arise from that. For instance, Said Adejumo informs us that '[between] 1990 and 1999, no less than twenty-four ethnic based minority rights groups emerged in the Niger Delta region mostly with radical bent' (171). The relationship within and between these groups were not always smooth even though they all perceived the national government as the enemy. In fact, the Joint Task Force (JTF), the national government's machinery to quench what it considered insurgency in the area, took advantage of internal wrangling to arrest the late Ken Saro-Wiwa.⁶ There were also issues of corruption and aggrandisement by the political leaders of the Niger Delta region which contributed to the suffering of the ordinary people in the area (Ibeanu, 307–345). In the face of these, the claims of the poets who locate the people's suffering in the north/south dialectic would be contestable. Even more questionable is the claim, given the Niger Delta's astonishing heterogeneity (a considerably small place in which many ethnic groups are cramped), that the peoples of the Niger Delta lived in peace until oil was discovered or the national government brought in its machineries of oppression. Such claims are characteristic of almost all activism. In reference to such claims by Saro-Wiwa in his writings, Huggan and Triffin write that '[the] combination of fable and high moral drama that can be seen in Saro-Wiwa's autobiographical accounts of the Ogoni's struggle also tends to be replicated in the critical discourse that is applied to them, indicating a general tendency in activist writing towards a theatricalisation of the issues it sets out' (43). There is however no doubt that, as we pointed out earlier, the poets in their endeavours participated in the general cultural struggle that aimed to raise a discourse against militarism in the Nigeria of the 1980s and the 1990s.

Ogaga Ifowodo: *Oil is My Curse*

Ogaga Ifowodo has published three volumes of poetry: *Homeland and Other Poems*, *Madiba*, and *The Oil Lamp*.⁷ In *Homeland and Other Poems*, his poetic imagination comes through as nationalist, charting the resilience of a brutalised nation under military oppression. Like those of his contemporaries, his voice is confrontational; it is revolutionary in the sense in which voices of new poets burden themselves with the entire weight of the grand theme. Experimenting with the sonnet form, in a sustained length perhaps unprecedented in Nigerian poetry, Ifowodo in *Madiba* mainly celebrates the South African activist and leader Nelson Mandela. Beyond that, however, he challenges apartheid and its concomitant infirmities, interrogates the very basis of humanity, and invokes what today we may call Mandelaism in a world riddled with contradictions. *The Oil Lamp*, designed as an alternative history of suffering and plunder in the Niger Delta, reads as sequenced episodes of man's inhumanity to man within a sickened context of nationalism. This volume focuses particularly on the question of ecological degradation, human waste, and outright plunder in the region of Nigeria seen by many as embattled, a region, as this volume implies, condemned to the vagaries of power discourse in Nigeria. In the earlier collections, there is a noticeable streak of Ifowodo's concern with ecology. *The Oil Lamp* is therefore a rounded, better structured orchestration of a theme that has been a recurrent decimal in his poetry.

Ifowodo's poems tend to narrate events in words conjugated with an adequate dose of imagery; they give you a sense that they are leading you to a depth of interrogation. The narrative texture serves as a strategy of description. The narrating poem poses as a clear mirror capturing, with a remarkable descriptive force, the realities around which the poem builds its theme. The images avoid being turgid, and are rather blunt, giving that sense of confrontation informing the collective vision of the poets of the military era. In contrast to Bassey's eco-sensitive poems, Ifowodo's poems constitute a thread of narration, harking back to real disasters that befell the people in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The sequenced events are:

- the arrest, doctored trial and judicial murder of the writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other people from Ogoniland;
- the 1998 fire disaster at Jese, a village in the Niger Delta, that killed hundreds of people scrambling for fuel out of burst pipes;
- and the extra-judicial government order said to have wiped out a village called Odi in the Niger Delta that was accused of murdering some soldiers in cold blood who were part of the perpetual military presence in the region.



Ifowodo brings these events to the reader vividly through engaging metaphors, startling paradoxes and innuendoes.

Like Bassey, Ifowodo writes as an activist. He also writes as an insider, though his style creates a considerable distance between him and the victims. Avoiding the victim-conditioned 'we', and taking a position of a story teller from the third person point of view, he narrates the events as a keen watcher, describes the people's suffering without inhibition, and offers a discourse that subverts government's narratives on these events. The long, narrative poems are dialogic, and even heteroglossic, harnessing the disparate voices of the oppressed (even of the oppressor), sometimes laying out the story, as it were, for the reader to decide on which side of the fight to be. But in spite of their gesture towards real events in life, Ifowodo's poems do have powerfully subjective messages underneath. Thus any claim of being objective is untenable. It is Linda Hutcheon who writes that '[the] narrativization of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure' (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 66). Ifowodo's narrativity is a consciously constructed event in order to score his goal of instituting a discourse against the regime of oppressive leaders. Negotiating through his metaphors and exploring these messages reveals not only the dialectical materialism in Ifowodo's art, but also his uncompromising indictment on the ruling class for treating people cruelly and degrading their land.

The part entitled 'Jese', containing 15 sequences, tells the moving story of the people of Jese caught between the fatality of an inferno and the hostility of a national government. The inferno is a result of a burst petroleum pipe, but specifically it is the result of a clash that breaks out between the villagers who rush to the burst pipes to scoop up petrol/kerosene and the soldiers sent to apprehend them. But, as the poem admits, there are other versions of the story: an over-excited bus driver strikes a match which falls on the burst pipes; a farmer sets fire on dry brush which extends to the burst pipes; an old woman comes to the scene of the burst pipes with her oil lamp. The multiplicity of narratives itself stamps the discursive space from which Ifowodo extracts his narrativity. The version the poem favours is that of Odiri which claims that a gun is fired into the oil by a security operative. This is supposedly more credible because the poem describes Odiri's involvement in the scramble for fuel and primarily invests in her story the immediacy, truth, and legitimacy of an eye-witness. She tells her story from a hospital bed. This is how she sustains burns: 'She had fallen face-up, hands in front to reach / for her daughter as the flames engulfed her' (104–105). But more importantly she witnesses how the fire starts:

A full keg of kerosene on her head,
she had stepped out of the pool, now ankle high,
to wait until her daughter filled a buffer keg

when she saw the raised arms and guns.
The crack of trigger on hammer, her daughter's
cries, and the shrieks of the scavenging crowd. (106–111)

This eye-witness account of how the fire begins contrasts the account given by the government information machinery. The government information, as contained in the poem, indicts the people for bursting the pipes out of sabotage. This accusation sounds convenient because the people have all along been clamouring for the equitable sharing of the wealth emanating from the region. Pipe bursting is therefore, in the government's view, the height of their subversive acts, and an expression of their insatiable greed. But the poem earlier points out that the pipes are old, 'corroded and cracked / by the heat of their burden' (42–43), a result of government's negligence. Indeed, in contesting the government's version of the story, the poem goes to lengths to reveal the unconcerned attitude of the government not only towards the people of the oil-rich region, but also towards the soil and technology that produce the wealth. The poem presents the national government of Nigeria as a heartless system only concerned with making wealth and siphoning more wealth into private pockets.

In dramatising the inferno at Jese, the poem effectively shows us the dual sin of the Nigerian government: the sin against the innocent people of the region and the sin against nature, that is, the earth in that region. The huge fire burns for days. The government, infuriated that it is an act of sabotage, refuses to send fire fighters. The people, in their peasant way, cannot curtail the fire. The people scavenging for fuel, in order to allay the 14-month 'fuel crunch' (1), are burnt to death. It has been shown in the beginning of the poem the desperation of not only the Niger Deltans, but all Nigerians, for fuel that eludes them in spite of the huge deposit of crude oil in the region. The Nigeria of the 1990s was a nation that suffered from untold fuel scarcity due to corruption and mismanagement in the government circle. The poem contends that it is out of desperation the people scavenge for fuel when the pipes burst. It is out of desperation that the uncontrollable fire kills them. From a smoke that 'curled lugubriously' (156) to the 'venomous scent of charring bones' (169), the intensity of the fire disaster hits the entire village.

The torment is double in the sense that apart from the people, the land is also damaged. And it is here that the poem achieves a greater concern with ecology. At the time of the fire, the land is green, a sign of life and vivacity. The persona has



earlier pointed out that the people, impelled by the fuel scarcity, indeed forced to make a choice between life and death, have resorted to cutting down the green trees for firewood. In their character, they 'would not break green twigs to make a meal' (4); but they have to survive by going against their wish. Consequently,

The forest quivered as trunk after trunk snapped,
and a nameless rage wagged green-fingered
branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe. (7–9)

This, however, is to be a milder havoc on the earth compared to the damage of the inferno. The poem even doubts the sanity of the earth through whose belly the oil pipes are passing. It is a sickened earth which as a result rusts the pipes forced on it. In a way, the rusting of the pipes leading to their bursting is the earth's revolt against an uncaring government. The poem concentrates on the ruthless erasure of the fauna and flora, and of the waters, precious products of the earth. The 'dazed rodent' (187), the 'leaping frog' (186), and 'the yellowing branches of rubber trees' (189) all suffer the same fate. Nature speaks up against this cruelty. The crops, personified, cry out against the defiant fire: '*It's midseason! We are not ripe! / Do not reap us! / Do not cook us!*' (205–206). The creeks and ponds also cry out:

*Take your cooking oil away
We are not pots or cauldrons!
Can't you see here's no kitchen
And you burn your meal to ashes?* (210–213)

But they cry in vain. The inferno is blind, and rages on through the land, through the waters, through human flesh. It consumes until there is nothing else to consume. At the end of the fire both humans and nature have perished. The earth here has been deeply wounded, and all because it houses crude oil.

Even with the disastrous burning, the government is hostile and unsympathetic. This is captured vividly, starting from the government's first reaction to the fire to its decision after the fire. Having accused the people of Jese of intentionally setting the fire, the government publicly announces that it has nothing to do with the victims of the fire. In his visit to the fire incident, the Head of State tells those alive: '*I came to see the damage you have done / and the roast dinner for me and my guests*' (237–238). He also unveils plans to get rid of the 'human blight' (232) standing against government's smooth operations in the Niger Delta. He declares that there are no aids for the victims, that his government would not support saboteurs. Such reaction from the government further deepens the scars of the earth and its people.

The metonymic voice of Madam Edoja at the end of the poem underscores the threnodic tone in the narrative:

Oil is my curse, oil is my doom.

Where are my children? Where is my husband?

Ashes and bones. Ashes and bones. (297–299)

This wail coming from a totally brutalised and dispossessed woman presupposes the eradication of a people and a culture. If the children who are the future, and the husband (who with the woman sexually creates the future) are all wiped out, then there is no posterity. This, in the poem's opinion, is what the national government wants to achieve. The wail is therefore an expression of the pessimism that confronts the future. In this wail is the summation of all destructions, both human and natural in the Niger Delta region.

That wail finds another focal outlet in the voice of Pa Piriye in 'Odi', the second episode of Ifowodo's narrative eco-poetry. Pa Piriye is cast as the oldest man in Odi, a small village in the Niger Delta that faces the undue wrath of soldiers because 'five cops and four / soldiers' (3–4) are said to be murdered in cold blood having been sent to Odi to, in the persona's words, 'break a youth revolt' (4). In the systematic destruction carried out on the village, Pa Piriye, 'hair and beard all white' (220) – an image that affirms the invalidity of the man and the entire village, finds himself without his family, without his loved ones, like Madam Edoja. He also bursts into an impassioned wail:

*[...] I have lived too long. Today, my feet
sink into the ground at the sight of my door.*

*When British soldiers looted and burned Benin,
we cursed strange men come from beyond the sea,
from the land of the dead, so evil they had no skin.*

*But who shall we curse now, who now is the enemy?
My eyes have seen two evils, must not see another. (224–230)*

The last line, following the irony of the first line (living on earth too long!), implies that he is set to commit suicide, to exit this world that now offers nothing to him other than sorrow. Very harrowing is the death of his young daughter of school age who used to read to him, himself a fisherman, such as in Gabriel Okara's *The*



Fisherman's Invocation. Ifowodo here establishes an intertextual dialogue with his precursors' preoccupation with the issues of ecology in the Niger Delta. Okara's volume contains such famous, well-anthologised poems as 'The Call of the River Nun' and 'Piano and Drums', often credited for first depicting and romanticising the topographical distinction of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Okunoye notes that '[the] liberty with which Okara in particular drew imagery and symbolism from his birthplace betrays the harmony and communion that the [poets of the Niger Delta origin] maintain with their immediate physical environment' (416–417). But sadly enough, the story of the Niger Delta region from the time of Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation* to that of Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* is a story of a place, of a people degenerating, sinking, from the idyllic to the nightmarish.

For it is only nightmarish that, as the poem dramatises, a whole battalion of furious soldiers should descend on Odi, a small village, because of murder charges against a few persons from there. More nightmarish is that the president of the country, satirised as 'false-star-general' (8), issues the order to destroy the helpless village. Before the president's order, the governor had subjected the villagers to oppressive pressures just for them to reveal the identities of those who killed the security personnel. The governor, not interested in carrying out civilised inquiry, invites the president, eager to unleash the wrath of power. A battalion then descends on the small village with sophisticated weapons such as grenades and machine guns, obviously expecting a showdown with the village's youths. As in 'Jese', Ifowodo narrates from that position that gives a fair sense of detachment, taking a position from which he creates characters that vocalise each side of the divide. But it is also clear that his intention, not totally disguised, inflects the narrative, often from the point of hyperreality, to compel the sympathy of the reader for the destroyed village. Here too he chooses words and constructs images which paints quite glaring picture of utter dehumanisation.

The destruction, symbolically, begins from the village school:

The first grenade, lobbed by a hand
too eager for live cremations, landed
on the roof of the village school.

The fire and the alarm started there
with the wiping out of the house of learning.
they had come to perfect what rain and wind
began weeks before by stripping the mud-
walled classroom blocks of their thatch roofs. (21–28)

Of significance here is the destruction of the school, a really symbolic gesture that signposts government's apathy, not only in the Niger Delta alone but in the entire Nigeria, towards child education and the mental development of the populace. Other than for this reason, why would the bombing start from the school? This theme runs through all the episodes of Ifowodo's narrative eco-poetry. In this theme of wilful destruction, the physical decay in the educational system, and the total neglect of the Niger Delta people is also subsumed. This further substantiates the paradox that in a place from which so much wealth is tapped, the structures of basic education are left, out of sheer inattention, to the 'rain and wind' to destroy. But that is even milder than bombing their mud houses, killing them and chasing some of them to the bush under the disguise of hunting for the killers of security personnel. When the grenades descend on the houses, the village erupts into loud screams of both humans and animals. They all seek refuge in the bush. Their travail heightens and startles us when, having stayed long in the bush, with children, hungry and dying, they resort to eating raw insects and roots. To be condemned to eating raw insects and fresh roots indicates the severe state of being refugees even in one's own society. And that is why the poem invokes the Nigerian civil war, and by doing so juxtaposes two situations of dehumanisation, both perceived instruments of violence against the people of Nigeria. This is telling because the Niger Delta, during the secession of the Igbo-dominated Biafra that sought to enfold it, is known to have stood vehemently against the secession, insisting on the existence of Nigeria as one nation-state. For the Niger Delta that stood for Nigeria as one entity, symbolised in the character of 'Sergeant Tobi, alias One Nigeria' (172), to face such untold brutalisation from the Nigerian government, it is nothing other than facing a state of self-defeating irony. This is what the death, even if self-willed, of Sergeant Tobi implies. He had been made invalid in the civil war when he fought to keep Nigeria one, but now Nigerian soldiers, with an order from the dictator, have finally sent him to his grave, not even recognising that he was also a soldier before. His own words best serve as his epitaph: 'One war spared / only my breath, froze me to bed. Let this mark my end' (179–181). But this war is not aimed at marking the end of Sergeant Tobi alone; it is also to mark the end of Odi. Before they leave the village, the soldiers use the blood of one of the dead animals and write on the walls and doors still standing:

THIS IS THE END OF ODI

THIS IS WHAT WE DO TO COWARDS

THIS IS JUST A WARNING

NEXT TIME YOU SEE SOJA YOU GO RUN!

NEXT TIME WE WILL SHOW NO MERCY

NEXT TIME FOR ONE SOJA YOU WILL ALL DIE! (197–202)



This brutal epilogue to their destruction totalises the intention of the national government that sends them, the viciousness underscoring the soldiers' assault, and the position of the otherness occupied by the villagers. It is a statement of conquest (ironic as it is) that gives the soldiers a sense of victory when in fact, as the poem displays, there is no fight or war here to justify any sense of victory. What we have here is sheer brutality brought upon a helpless people, and on their ecology, their flora and fauna, as we see in the killing of the animals, the destruction of the bush and the pollution of their water and the atmosphere.

In the next sequence 'Ogoni', Ifowodo narrativises the series of events in Ogoniland, a section of the Niger Delta, which resulted in the judicial murder of the writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists. It was mentioned earlier how the death of Saro-Wiwa has inspired poetry and writing in other genres in Nigeria. It is, for most Nigerian writers and intellectuals, the culmination of a dictator's assault on both humanity and nature. 'If one of the axioms of postcolonial ecocriticism,' Graham Huggan and Helen Triffin write, 'is that there is no social justice without ecological justice, then that axiom is no more clearly illustrated than in the nightmarish events surrounding the death of [...] Ken Saro-Wiwa' (35). Those 'nightmarish events' form the basic content of Ifowodo's narrative poem.

Ifowodo deploys a different narrative strategy here which suitably foregrounds the arrogance, the cruelty, the lack of conscience of the national government, and the state design to eliminate dissidence of whatever form in the Niger Delta. It is the first person narrative, bringing us up-close to the subjectivity of power, erasing the gap between the narrator and the audience, presenting in utter clarity the figural representation of the military junta in the character of Major Kitemo, alias 'Kill-Them-All' (153). The sequence begins with an introduction of the man Major Kitemo in an ironic way: he is the 'boss of the mob [used by the government] / chief pacifier / of the lower Niger's / still primitive tribes' (1–4). Notice here the allusion to the colonial project emplotted in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.⁸ Major Kitemo is addressing the press for successfully completing his job for his country and his conscience. This is ironic because it is soon revealed, through his own words, that the job is the killing of innocent Ogoni people of the Niger Delta in the most conscienceless manner. Ifowodo's narrative strategy, allows us to see and *feel* the self-apotheosising vicious military major, shifts from the realism of the previous sequences to offer us the psychology behind the power to kill. In the pitch of his telling us about himself Major Kitemo says 'I know / two hundred and twenty-one ways to kill a man' (139–140).

But the vital contribution of this sequence to Ifowodo's narrativisation of the Niger Delta conundrum, its paradox, and its question of exclusion, is the dialectic of land ownership that is dramatised in the argument between Major Kitemo and the people of the Niger Delta. The issue of land ownership, rights to one's property,

the equitable distribution of wealth, has been integral to the demands of the various pressure groups in the Niger Delta. Major Kitemo, to justify his lust for killing, first confronts the people with the challenge that the land does not belong to them. Commonplace questions asked by an old man, a woman, a school boy, and a teacher easily deflect the guarded intention of the military regime for dispossessing and displacing the people. The old man seeks to know how Nigeria as a country gets to own the oil-rich Niger Delta region, which from the beginning of things belong to the people of the area. When Major Kitemo insists that the land belongs to Nigeria by a 'decree' (70), the woman startles him by asking for the composition of Nigeria. Her question is symbolic of the entire scope of debate about the continued existence of Nigeria as a state in which, it is claimed, the dominant ethnic groups such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo continue to marginalise other minor ethnic groups such as Ogoni and Ijaw. In his own words Major Kitemo confesses to his inadequacy as a dialectician, as a dialogist, indeed as a pacifier which he ironically claims he is. More questions from the school boy and the teacher throw him off balance. As characteristic of soldiers, he resorts to violence.

What we know next are his strategies for killing. Aside from the express order to kill from the president of the country, he orchestrates a veritable gimmick that ultimately provides what he considers a cogent reason for him to kill the people. He sets the Ogoni people against themselves, and takes the ensuing violence, the killing of 'four men' (206), as an excuse to strike them. He invades their evening markets:

At my word, big guns would go off
And at first, the fish-market, always
A hubbub equal to the sea's roar,

would be dead-still, and you could hear
a lamp, its oil drying, splutter its rage,
or the chink of change dropped by shocked hands. (187–192)

These tactics, heinous as it is, sets in a wave of panic among the Ogonis. Fishermen and women by profession, their lives get totally paralysed when gun-toting soldiers prowl their fish markets and shoot around. But this is just the beginning of the trouble. Major Kill-Them-All, eager to produce results for his 'C-in-C' (an acronym for Commander in Chief), eager, more importantly, to avenge their rude challenging of his authority, is set to bring the people to their knees in a military way. So when they flee into the bush, he goes after them. He keeps the innocent village utterly terrorised: 'Guns and grenades yelled my new name for fifteen days' (217). This



achieves the aim of not only bullying the physically weak though psychically powerful land dialecticians (symbolised in the old man, the old woman, the boy, and the school teacher), but it also brings upon them deaths that finally cripple them into total surrender. A wailing voice, in this case collective, like the voices we have seen in the previous episodes, vocalise the surrender:

*Please, please, we will do what you say, anything
you want. But stop the shelling. Please! Please!*
[...]

*Three have died of snakebites, four of malaria.
Two women have given birth under trees. Five elders' hearts
expired with the last bomb. Our stomachs are raw with roots. (233–238)*

They too, like the people of Jese and Odi, are compelled to surrender, to come out of the bush, where they are condemned to eating raw food, and give up their activism so that they can live. They are perfectly cowed, and their sense of dialectics expires as they face the brutal action of a battalion invigorated by what it considers to be a nationalist service.

The narrative of *The Oil Lamp* foregrounds the question of exclusion, of marginalisation, of inequity, and, beyond that, crystallises the parody of a nation that lays claim to federalism. The perspectivisation of the aforementioned human concerns – and more – inevitably realises an engaging political edge in what primarily reads as eco-poetry. The character of the emerging eco-poetry in Nigeria, as we hope to have demonstrated with the eco-poetry of Ifowodo and Bassey here, is distinctively political; that is, issues of ecology are tied up with the struggles of the people to survive in a heavily militarised environment. Indeed it is not only the question of the environment suffering alone but that of a people being brutalised because of, and along with, the environment. In the narrativity that results from Ifowodo's poetisation, the most potent index of ecological degradation in the Niger Delta, in the view of *The Oil Lamp*, is the terrible condition of the people who inhabit the small but very wealthy region without which Nigeria cannot survive as a nation, as Nigerian leaders unpretentiously imply through their actions. In other words, in Ifowodo's eco-poetry as in the eco-poetry of Bassey, the human voice, rather than the ecological voice, is more projected, not because the ecological voice is not as important but because the human voice, rather more urgent, accentuates the cohesion of what appears as two distinct concerns, the concern of humanity and that of the environment. For these poets the two concerns are inextricably tied together given that the people are spiritually, psychically, physically connected to

their land. The people are either farmers or fishers, they are either on the soil hoeing or in the water casting nets. The pollution of the earth, their earth, naturally threatens their existence. But perhaps the abiding contribution of Ifowodo's and Bassey's historicisation of the ongoing struggles in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is that it identifies the crises of existence, and the causes of the crises (the Nigerian government and multinational oil corporations such as Shell BP), and gives a voice, even if prejudiced, to the voiceless people of the Niger Delta, especially those caught in the drama of survival. Herein is the discourse strength of this eco-poetry in the template of discursive subversion sustained by the military era poets.

Notes

1. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria refers to the geographical area covered by Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State and Rivers State.
2. For instance, statistics show that 'Nigeria extracts about 93.1 million metric tons of oil annually from its soil to account for 2.9% of world production. The Niger Delta and the sea gulf of its shores, which host over a dozen oil companies, produce what accounts for 80% of Nigeria's annual revenue' (Ejobowah, 33).
3. Oyeniyi Okunoye also points out that '[earlier] studies on the Niger Delta [...] privilege the experience of the Ogoni, who were the first to initiate sustained resistance and consequently became the most politically visible group in the region' ('Alterity, Marginality and the National Question', 414).
4. The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa in particular spurred or inspired a considerable number of poetic responses from the military era poets. Apart from numerous individual poems in anthologies, some of the collections inspired are Adiyi Bestman's *Textures of Dawn*, Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*, Akeem Lasisi's *Iremoje: Ritual Poetry for Ken Saro-Wiwa*, and the anthology *For Ken, For Nigeria* edited by E.C. Osundu.
5. Nnimmo Bassey was born on 11 June 1958. He is a qualified architect and had practised for about ten years before actively engaging in human rights issues. In 1993, he co-founded Environmental Rights Actions (ERA), an NGO based in Nigeria. He is a prominent member of Friends of the Earth International.
6. For more on the internal, inter-group crisis that led to the arrest and subsequent execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, see the chapter entitled 'The Ogoni Wars' in Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*.
7. Ogaga Ifowodo hails from the Delta State of Nigeria. He studied in Nigeria and qualified as a lawyer, taking active part in civil rights and pro-democracy struggles, before he left Nigeria. Between 1997 and 1998, he was arrested and detained without trial by the junta of General Sani Abacha. He lives and works in the United States of America.



8. The District Commissioner who comes too late to arrest Okonkwo plans to write a book about the primitive way of living in Africa. His title is *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (See *Things Fall Apart*, 147–148).

Conclusion: Exile and the Trope of Dispersal

These writers have remained ‘inmates’ in the larger prison of society, metaphorically living behind bars and inside the barbed wire of suffocating, repressive institutions that seek to fetter their imagination and lock up their creativity.

— Micere Githae Mugo, ‘Exile and Creativity: A Prolonged Writer’s Block’

For beyond the question of influences lies a consideration of the historical and thematic correspondence of European literature to our literature, and the way that correspondence touches upon the present status of modern African literature and is likely to affect its future destiny. Each generation of African writers has employed the prevailing idiom of its time in Europe – each, also, with its own measure of success. In short, there has always been a degree of imitation of European literature.

— Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*

Perhaps this concluding chapter should begin by drawing attention to the cynicism that the military era poets (like their precursors) might have, by writing their *kind* of poetry, undertaken an exercise in futility. This cynicism manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, there are those who think the poets have invested so much utility in their art, regarding it as a means of struggle against a repressive authority; an authority mainly constituted by military men who (we may conjecture) rarely read poetry or, if they did, would hardly be disturbed by the force of the poem. This view is vigorously expressed by the scholar Wole Ogundele in an essay entitled ‘An Appraisal of the Critical Legacies of the 1980s Revolution in Nigerian Poetry in English’. Juxtaposing the poetics of the Okigbo-Clark-Soyinka generation (following Harry Garuba, called the nationalist-modernist period) and that of the Ofeimun-Ojaide-Osundare generation (following Funso Aiyejina, called the Alter-Native period), Ogundele wonders what the overtly instrumentalist ideology of the Alter-Native poetics has achieved. If the poets, in their Marxist aesthetics, have set out to confront the cruel leadership of their nation, then to what extent has that aim been achieved? In Ogundele’s view, ‘if the politicians learnt no lessons from the poetry of the [modernist-nationalist] period because it was “too obscure”, they



learnt none either from the prose and drama of the Alter-Native era which, surely, were both “more accessible” and more “political and socially relevant” (144). It is Ogundele’s contention (like the contentions of many other scholars) that the Alter-Native ideology – the ideology inherent in the military era poetic production – is counter-productive. Secondly, there are those (including Ogundele) who think that the poets, by focusing too much on what they perceive as their social engagement, mortgage the craft of poetry for its purported interventionist role.¹ The British scholar Stewart Brown is one of such thinkers. Brown opines that “[while] there can be no doubting these [new Nigerian] poets’ sincerity or the depth of their anguish, the unending self-righteousness of the narrative voice, the artless predictability of the sentiments and the clichéd language of ‘protest’ undermine [...] the force of so many of these poems, *as poems* (‘Still Daring the Beast’, 101). Such critical (indeed cynical) positions have been met with counter-arguments. Although this should not detain us here, it might be useful just to mention one of such. In the preface to his volume *A Song from Exile*, Olu Oguibe, one of the earliest voices of the military era poets, writes,

It is arguable to what extent the artist can influence or turn the course of history, and we in Nigeria have had so long a history of battles between the artist and the state that we have even greater reason to be doubtful [...]. [But] we are simply saying what we see, for it is seeing and not saying, our people say, that kills the elder. It is hearing and not heeding that will kill the child. That, for us, is the fate of the emperor and the poet. (7)

This of course is just one strand of the defence, with other poets such as Remi Raji (see his preface to *A Harvest of Laughters*) claiming that they are moved to soothe the pain of the suffering masses.

The foregoing scenario is remarkable in the sense that it is, on the one hand, symptomatic of the debate surrounding the entire foundation of African literature in European languages often charged with being heavily anthropological and sociological, of being too theme-concentrated, and of being self-limiting, amongst others. For instance, the scholar Charles E. Nnolim in an essay entitled ‘African Literature in the 21st Century: Challenges for Writers and Critics’ argues that African writers, instead of perpetually binding themselves to Africa’s unending socio-political problems, should concentrate on ‘forward-looking’ literature that imagines a ‘utopia for Africa’ (6). He wonders why Africans do not write science fiction or do not write much about peoples of other nations and continents.² On the other hand – and this is what is more important to us here – the scenario arguably informs the phenomenon of exile or the central trope of dispersal dominant in what we may call the second phase of the military era poetry. In the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s or thereabouts, almost all of the military era poets were in

Nigeria, some of them having just earned their first or second degrees. Most (if not all) of the poems analysed in the previous chapters were written during or about that period which the researcher chooses to call the first phase. From the images, symbols, tones and tenors of the poems, it is clear that those poems were *intended* to constitute a discourse that would confront the suppressive leadership of the time. But it is also clear from the same components, and their invented personas, that the poets knew they were *fighting* a leadership that easily over-powered them. Most of the poets knew that sooner rather than later, they would vacate the land for the dictator. Although there were no clear cases of a dictator banning a book of poetry in Nigeria (a sign, by the way, that the dictator and his cohorts hardly read poetry), the poets self-styled themselves in that period as anti-military, pro-democracy activists and saw their writing as the cultural arm of their struggle. It then became imperative, even *fashionable*, for these poets to flee from the country as oppression grew intense in spite of their activism and poetic acts: some out of threats to their lives, some out of frustration with the land.

But as the first epigraph of this chapter implies, these poets would conveniently be said to be already prisoners and exiles in their own country. Indeed their exodus out of Nigeria is merely a second level of exile. Exile here is broadly conceived of as what David Bevan calls ‘a constant of our common predicament’ in which case it is ‘a form of estrangement [...] [and] otherness’ (3). Exile, in its intensity, is thus synonymous with a prison condition. The notion of exile as prison condition is the main focus of the book *The Word behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile* edited by the Ghanaian poet and scholar Kofi Anyidoho. In his introduction, with the moving title ‘Prison as Exile/Exile as Prison: Circumstances, Metaphor, and a Paradox of Modern African Literatures’, Anyidoho harps on the perennial leadership crisis in Africa which has, through various indices, reduced the continent to a huge prison in which its writers see themselves as exiles. ‘The focus on exile and prison,’ Anyidoho writes, ‘as two sides of the experience of oppression was almost inevitable, considering that intellectuals and creative artists who insist on fighting oppression, often end up in prison [and] that those who manage to survive prison often end up in exile’ (3). The poets of the military era, and most Nigerian writers who emigrated to the West during the military dictatorships, would claim that if they had not left the country, they would have been killed. Such claims are not far from the truth, given the fact that Sani Abacha at one point declared Wole Soyinka wanted for treasonable offence; but worse still was the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Abacha regime. The point is arguable here that it was during the Abacha regime that Nigeria suffered the worst form of brain drain – it lost not only writers, but also intellectuals and academics.

Exile, whether in the form of estrangement within one’s society or emigration to another country, would come to affect the poetry of the military era thematically and stylistically. From some of the poems studied in the previous chapters, one can



discern the condition of exile. The extreme conditions the personas of the poems express or live in; the obvious class struggle that results in the dialectic of the weakest versus the strongest, the dirge that comes from a brutally cowed soul, all suggest the condition of exile and imprisonment. Even from the beginning we notice that these poets, unlike the poets of the Alter-Native era, succumb to what one might call a forced position of dispersal as their voices wail languidly in a society whose system does not seem remediable. This, it seems, is precisely Harry Garuba's point when he writes that '[the] new poets [...] appear to accept contradiction and multiplicity, refusing the consolation of originary myths around which definitions of self and of writing should cohere. More rhizomic than deeply rooted, their poetry finds validation from several directions without establishing any sole determinant' ('The Unbearable Lightness of Being', 66). Although they are still, given their interpellation into the Nigerian literary tradition, concerned about the fate of the nation, their poetry (of and about Nigeria of the 1980s and 1990s) betray individual tropes that combine inevitable submissiveness (to the power of oppression) and the desire to forge one's path out of the prison condition. This tendency with the military era poets and writers (at the first phase) would explode into full dispersal (at the second phase). Obi Nwanyawu's expression here captures this situation: 'A post-Biafran, post-Marxist, post-Feminist, and globalised spirit clearly marks the ubiquitous adventurism of the present generation [what this book calls the military era] of Nigerian literature' (43). In a sense this statement can qualify what one finds in the larger scene of African literature in European languages today. Brenda Cooper's recent study, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, explores the dispersal dimension in recent fiction from Africa. 'This younger generation,' Cooper writes, 'celebrated a degree of freedom as roamers and adventurers and displayed less pressure to commit themselves to the politics of the nation in their fictions than the earlier generation had done' (164).

Expectedly the latest collections of some of the military era poets have come to bear titles and contain poems that betray the condition of exile. Uche Nduka distinguishes himself not only by extremely thematising the exile condition, but also by evolving a distinct formalism that further estranges his poetry from the tradition that begot him. The intensely personal character of his latter poetry invites a critique that would explore an acute sense of exile and dispersal from a postmodernist perspective. Other poets who have long migrated to the West have either published or completed manuscripts which either centre on exile or contain poems on exile.³ From Amaritsero Ede are the collections *Collected Poems: A Writer's Pain and Caribbean Blues* and *Globetrotter & Hitler's Children*, both dramatising the harsh aspect of the condition of exile. Indeed, apart from Nduka, Ede is the next among the military era poets whose imagination is acutely invigorated by the realities of living outside one's country. Afam Akeh's *Letter Home*, Unoma Azuah's 'Home is where the Heart Hurts' (unpublished), and Maik Nwosu's 'Stanzas from the Underground'

(unpublished), among others, are volumes that thematise exile, consciously using the trope of dispersal. This trope exhibits a vivid awareness of *being* (thematically and stylistically) among other peoples, literatures, cultures, styles, and voices. The form is ultimately characterised by pastiche; and the content by a social text that explores, in diverse ways, the triumphs and travails of multiculturalism. Obviously this is tending towards postmodernism. The postmodern practice in the second phase of the military era poets is particularly obvious in the way some of the poets, having settled outside Nigeria, now tend to distance themselves from the literary tradition out of which they have emerged. Even poets like Remi Raji (who lives in Nigeria but constantly travels out of the country) find themselves implicated in this postmodern phenomenon.⁴ In the larger context of some African scholars' hostility to postmodernism and post-structuralism, the second phase of the military era poetic production expectedly encounters criticisms such as that of Niyi Osundare (where he refers to the poets as the CNN generation) which has been discussed.⁵ For some scholars and observers, these poets are straying away from what is considered as original literary tradition or the *authentic* tradition of African writing. They are lured by the competing cultures of what Fredric Jameson insists is late capitalism or what has come to be strangely regarded by others as *glocalisation*. But the other side of the argument is what Abiola Irele expresses in the second epigraph above. There is no period of Nigerian or African writing, in Irele's view, that does not have a 'historical and thematic correspondence' to that of European, American, or World Literatures. In this premise, the postmodern practice of the second phase of military era poets (dispersal, pastiche, multiculturalism) is one such correspondence whereby the poets who exile themselves to Europe and America succumb to the pressures and influences of *glocalisation*. This phenomenon invites a sustained scholarly attention.

Further studies on the military era or the third generation of Nigerian poets which focus on the second phase (particularly on the condition of exile and the trope of dispersal) would hopefully yield useful output. This book's effort, to reiterate the point, is limited to the first phase with a specific attention on the poetic act that was part of the political struggle to alter the condition of repression that climaxed in the last two military dictatorships in Nigeria.

Notes

1. In his 'Afterword' (earlier published as 'Introduction' to Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace*) to the monumental book *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*, Biodun Jeyifo also remarks that the Alter-Native poets sacrifice craft, as it were, on the altar of social commitment. He singles Osundare out as a distinct voice, and claims that 'while there are constant flashes of inspiration [among the Alter-



Native poets], the perspiration is notably scanty. And the most dramatic manifestation of this situation is the relationship of the 'new' poets to language and words' (610).

2. In a more recent and controversial essay, 'In Africa, the Laureate Curse', the young Nigerian novelist and journalist, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, argues that the Nobel Laureate should not for now be given to any African writer because most younger writers would end up imitating the Laureate, just as many in Nigeria have imitated Wole Soyinka. In her view, such imitation results in perpetuating a self-limiting literary tradition. Expectedly her view draws trenchant criticisms. For her essay, see http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/opinion/12nwaubani.html?_r=1&emc=eta1.
3. This researcher learnt of the manuscripts from his personal communication with the poets. Some of them generously gave the researcher copies of their manuscripts for the purposes of this study.
4. Compare for instance Raji's *Webs of Remembrance*, his second collection, to his *Shuttlesongs: America – a Poetic Guided Tour*, the third which he published after his first trip to the United States, or his latest volume, *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*.
5. See for instance Part XI of the book *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, for the debate on post-structuralism and postmodernism from the perspective of African literature. Also see the chapter entitled 'African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorising' in Niyi Osundare's *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture*.

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Nation, Power and Dissidence in Third Generation Nigerian Poetry in English is a theoretical and analytical survey of the poetry that emerged in Nigeria in the 1980s. Hurt into poetry, the poets collectively raise aesthetics of resistance that dramatises the nationalist imagination bridging the gap between poetry and politics in Nigeria. The emerging generation of poetic voices raises an outcry against the repressive military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s. Ingrained in the tradition of protest literature in Africa, the third-generation poetry is presented here as part of the cultural struggles that unseat military despotism and envisage a democratic society.

Not only does Egya place emphasis on the poetry's interaction with the culture and history of military oppression in Nigeria – an interaction that sees the poetry not only feeding from the history but also feeding it; he also contextualises the generational consciousness of these poets. Scholars of Nigerian literature, African literature, and researchers interested in world literatures will welcome *Nation, Power and Dissidence in Third Generation Nigerian Poetry in English* as an invaluable contribution to indigenous knowledge, critical studies in Africa, and the rehabilitation and production of an African aesthetic.

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